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Mild Cartoon Violence
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Letter from the Editor

Growing pains

Storytelling happens all around us. Story defines us, it powers our myths and dreams and emotions. In important and abstract ways, video games tell a story, and I don't mean by halting the action and tossing in a cut scene for some random dialogue.

A building in the next Silent Hill or Metroid or Zelda can be the story. The creatures are the characters, the details inside the building walls are part of an event, each floor can be a scene that builds action and raises the stakes. Decisions impact what might go down in the next room, and eventually, gameplay beat after gameplay beat, there's a climactic battle that concludes our tale.

Along the way, something is lost and must be rediscovered. It could be as simple as the need to heal. You could apply the convention of storytelling to a game in some pretty creative ways, and you can do so without a single moment of cutscene.

Cutscenes can destroy the language of game mechanics—they too often do. Part of telling a story is impacting the internal and the external, making changes. In a game, you are the heart of the story, but not a single word needs to come out of your mouth to push that story forward, to make changes, no matter how simple, within the environment.

I'm oversimplifying things here, but it's the best I've got in preparing the leftovers of hit-and-run conversations that defined GDC 2009—a manic show where talented industry people get together to talk about video games. Most of the juicy stuff happens in the wee morning hours, induced by the excitement of drinks and the rare opportunity to mingle with fellow creators.

I'm pathetically ill as I write this, fighting a nasty flu/sinus infection combo, but I've gone in with the antibiotic attack, strategically laying down my soldiers to sweep in for the kill. I've obviously been way too focused on the craft of games lately, because I'm thinking of my immune system as a tactical shooter, health shield low but plenty of white blood cells set up to defend. GDC will do that to you.

Now I have an excuse to back peddle and say "I was sick and delirious!" when I say, "Don't you think Heather Chaplin's comments during the Burned by Friendly Fire: Game Critics Rant session were just a tiny bit on point when she said game designers are 'a bunch of ****ing adolescents?'"

Ok stop! That was just a test to see if that last paragraph gets picked up somewhere and printed out of context, as I'm wondering is exactly what happened with Chaplin. Or at the very least that her point was not made as delicately as she might have wanted. I wasn't at her talk, I only heard about it in one of those late-night chats with developers who were pretty upset by what she said. But you know what? It's not that game makers are adolescents, it's that they tend to make the kinds of games that in a very oversimplified discussion would lead to that kind of comment. There is a thread in there that does deserve more pointed attention.

And so what? So what if most games are crude power trips? So what if most of what we do in games is kill stuff? I love video games. I love killing stuff in video games. I love ramming into things with vehicles and blowing stuff up and hacking and slashing and running around in gorgeous virtual worlds. I love taking the role of Vin Diesel in the fantastic Assault on Dark Athena and becoming a cold, badass killer who just wants to get out of an oppressively striking game space while slicing body parts off cool-looking soldiers. There's an artistry there that takes an essay to fully uncover.

"Maybe we'll be in the same predicament ten years from now as we are today."

Interacting with so many amazingly talented people at GDC makes me feel proud to have been an intimate part of a form of entertainment that has enriched my life since I was tall enough to reach the Pac-Man arcade machine. And interacting with these talented people asserts a truth: plenty of us do want to take this industry beyond what some may associate with as being juvenile. Just because I say, "So what?" I also say, "So what's next?"

Maybe we'll be in the same predicament ten years from now as we are today. The story of gaming is only a few chapters in, and many people are caught in that awkward cutscene, struggling to uncover the proper language to push ahead confidently into the next act.

To quote Robert McKee from his book *Story*, "To retreat behind the notion that the audience simply wants to dump its troubles at the door and escape reality is a cowardly abandonment of the artist's responsibility."

~Brady Fiechter

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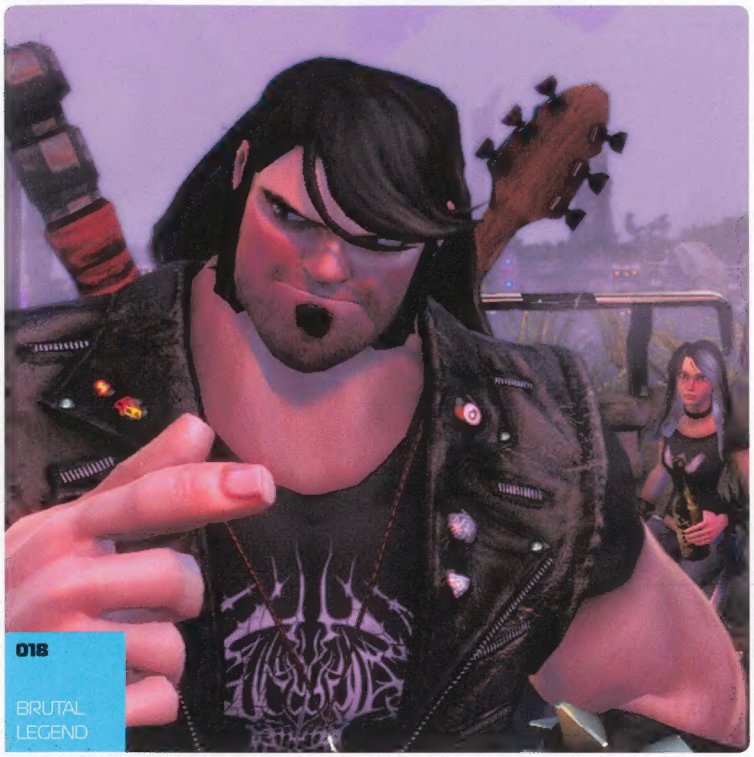

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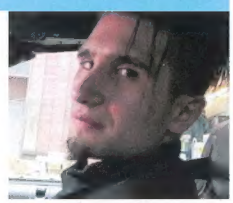
The Strange, Strange Story of Bob

Bob's Game? Really?



"Welcome to Bob's Game," Bob's Game's website proclaims. "Thanks for playing"

Robert Pelloni is a crafty game developer, a master showman, or a lunatic.

Perhaps he is all three. The man first came to public attention in August 2008, releasing a Youtube video of Bob's Game, a Nintendo DS title Pelloni claims he had been working on, by himself, for five years.

"It's the game I wanted to play when I was younger," Pelloni claims in the video. "It didn't exist, so I made it." According to the video, "Bob's Game is a simple 2D adventure game, but without the repetitive battles. Instead, there is more focus on story, puzzles, and communication—many characters have deep personalities that evolve."

The video shows a tiny, spiky-haired boy named Yuu running around a world that is "always changing based on the time and day of the week."

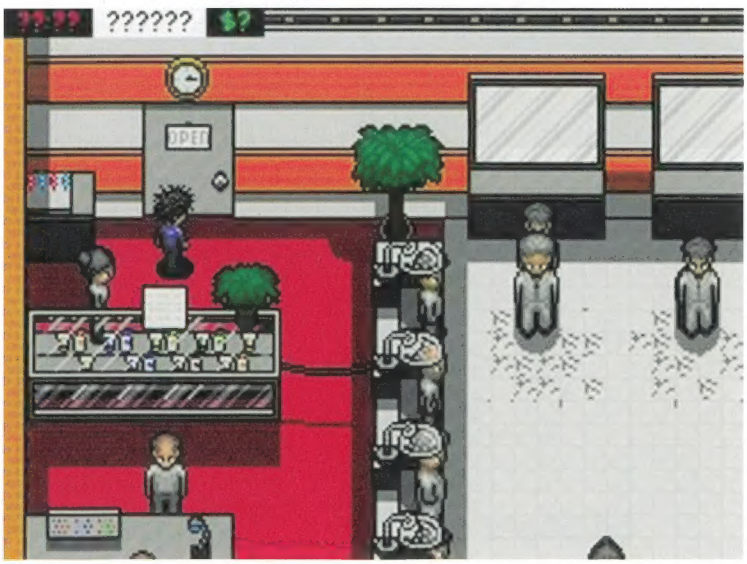
Pelloni created the Web site Bobsgame.com to promote his title. His story attracted the attention of game Web sites and, from here, things began to get decidedly…weird.

According to Pelloni, Nintendo refused to sell him a development kit for the Nintendo DS. This prompted Pelloni to start a 100-day protest in which he refused to leave his room. The protest was a gag; Pelloni ended it after a supposed 30 days and one trashed room. At the end of the protest, Pelloni claimed to have given up on his dream. Bob's Game was dead.

It wasn't over, though, because Pelloni then staged a Youtube video in which he visited the Nintendo World store in New York City and put copies of his game on its shelves. More strangeness followed with a video introducing Bob as a supervillain who had been created by Nintendo's treachery and the final boss in Bob's Game.

Now, Pelloni has released a playable demo of Bob's Game, one that will work on the DS emulator No$gba. "If you hurt yourself playing this game, you are an idiot," the warning screen reads. Start playing Bob's Game and, well, there's not much … but it does conclude with a Tetris-style minigame.

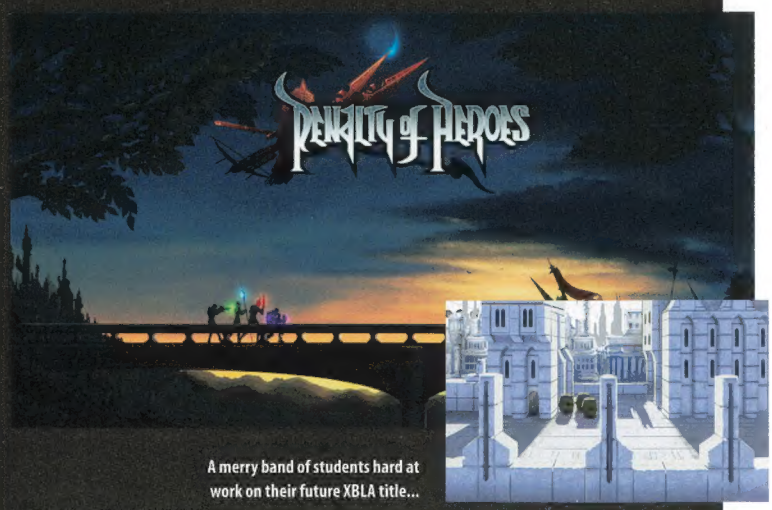
> "This prompted Pelloni to start a 100-day protest in which he refused to leave his room."



Make Game, Land Degree, Get Job

Getting a degree is fun. You work your ass off, get a piece of paper and then try and find a job. Some degrees might actually be fun for real, like a game degree from Gotland University in Sweden where an entire scholastic year is spent toiling to make a game. Ask anyone who makes games and they'll admit it's genuinely hard work, and there's never a guarantee that piece of paper saying you graduated is going to land that dream job. But what makes Gotland University interesting is that it's online based and open to students around the globe, and every bit of the annual studies are linked directly to the game you are making. As the best engineers will tell you, "learning by doing is by far the best way of learning," says Gotland teacher Troels Linde.

Students who have taken the program can be found on credits across companies like DICE, GRIN, Avalanche, and Massive Entertainment, and will actually have games they've developed as part of the curriculum see the light of day released on console. Xbox Live will feature a game this year named Pentaly of Heroes.



A merry band of students hard at work on their future XBLA title...

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"Please don't let online gaming take over our hobby."

I needed to drop you guys a line to let you know what an outstanding piece you did in the April issue. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" was fun to read and to the point with an array of different views. While each of you had great insight, foresight, and concerns I must say Heather Anne Campbell nailed it. Her commentary regarding the world economy and how it has and will effect the industry was spot on and I hope many of you are correct in saying this will be the longest generation in console gaming to date. Many of my favorite games of all-time came at the end of the PlayStation 2's dominance, i.e. Shadow of the Colossus and God of War I & II. I applaud Ms. Campbell's humility for renouncing the Wii as it stands. I believe many of us had foolishly high hopes for Nintendo's innovation, myself at the frontline, but in the end I fear we were sold a gimmick with obscenely sub-par games to match. I share your shame and if the PS3 becomes the Saturn of this generation I'll be okay with that. So it didn't dominate the market. So what? For my taste buds, it's really the only console serving up the deliciousness. Some good stuff comes out of the other camps but my banner flies with Sony and I'll gladly ride with the vanguard.

All these points were fantastic but Heather's section really pulled me in with "The Demise of The Lonely Game." It's a damn shame, isn't it? It's nice to have all this online co-op and what not, but in the end I need some raw, solitary emotion and a six-pack to amplify it. I too, fear the sun may be setting on such an experience, but only for a while. You'll see, it'll come back around. Storytelling in games will eventually get tired of sleeping in the back seat and have it's turn at the wheel.

In any event, excellent work folks! Job well done! Thank you so much for your the effort you put into your publication and nice work on the new website. I have several subscriptions to gaming mags, but yours is the one with the most polish, common sense, and class. And the one I look forward to the most.

Aequistas Veritas,

Sam Talley

I never did post my impressions of this issue [Kingdom Under Fire II], but I will mention one thing that really struck me. In "The Good, The Bad & The Ugly," the omnibus editor soapbox that I love seeing in the mag, Heather had one paragraph called "The Demise Of The Lonely Game." Thanks for reminding me of a thought I've had before that always gets shoved out of the way by louder thoughts. I LOVE the loneliness in "Shadow of the Colossus," making me feel something other than the usual frantic anxiety of a more 'game-like' game. Having that wide open plain, with hidden ruins and isolated oases to discover, reaches deeper inside me than any other game ever has, I think. The quiet solitude is such a decompression after multiplayer explosions and neon colors that I have to take a 're-compression' after playing it, so I can get back into the faster pace of other games and life in general. Like watching *The Killer* after a *Rambo* marathon, the fresh perspective within the genre is practically exhilarating. I want a new Lonely game.

-Posted by MethRattle from the Play forums

Dear Play and the world,

Please don't let online gaming take over our hobby. I love playing online, but I love playing single-player games more. Online gaming often recalls going to a theater and trying to lose myself to the experience while people chomp on popcorn, carry on conversations and check their cell phones.

-Anonymous

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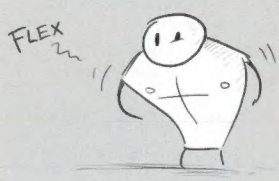
THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

ATTACK OF THE MEAT-MEN

Grunty male action stars are usually beefy gents, but the Darwinian nightmares of celluloid are nothing compared to the insanely proportioned creatures that the player controls in action **games**.

Is the male lead of your title as hideously mutated as the beasts he's fighting?



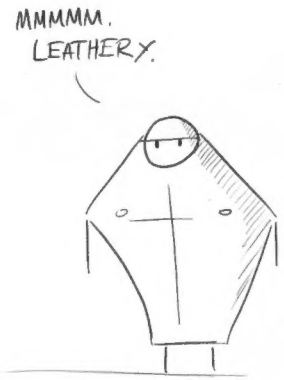
There's not actually anything abnormal about the guy. He's muscular, sure, but you wouldn't bat an eyelid if you saw him in the street....unless he was carrying his gun.

☐ **500pts**

The guy looks like he fell out of the 1980s. His pumped-up muscles are comparable with those seen in *Predator*; large, but proportional.

☐ **100pts**

The man is huge. The width of his neck indicates he's swallowed a football and his unnaturally swollen muscles suggest that he was probably allergic to it.



☐ **50pts**

This tiny-skulled man was obviously suckled on steroids. Able to haul the most heavy of weapons, and the vehicles they are attached to, "brick sh*t-house" doesn't even come close to describing his impossible, physique.

Additional points lost if he's a recently sprung prisoner, a commando brought back into service or is the last member of a warrior race.

☐ **5pts**

Round of Bits

Eidos and Square Enix officially merged into one giant corporate entity

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 has been announced for a November 10 release of this year

PS2 is a measly 99 bucks and still Sony's king of the hill after all these years

In their 100 Agents of Change, Rolling Stone magazine placed Miyamoto at 13, with fellow game maker Cliff Bleszinski coming in at 73

The Nintendo DS is the fastest selling system to reach 100 million units sold

E3 is almost here again and everyone is still complaining

The Wii finally gets a storage solution (sort of) with memory card porting

Xbox 360 hit one million units sold in Japan

Classic arcade games are finally coming to Wii Shop, beginning with Galpus, Mappy, The Tower of Druaga, and Starforce

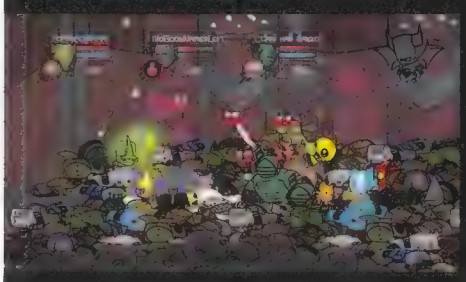
Ys VII is a PSP game, and Falcom's first original console venture in a decade

Bethesda released a downloadable episode for Fallout 3 that was so glitched and broken not even Bethesda itself could ignore it.

Fallout 3 deservedly takes Game of the Year honors at GDC

"Ninety percent of what is considered impossible is in fact possible." Hideo Kojima at GDC

Castle Crashers wins Game of the Year in 2nd Annual Xbox Live Awards and is most downloaded title of last year



Gaming Gone By File #003

E3

Before 1995, there were no dedicated trade shows for the video games market in the United States. Instead, games were a part of other electronics-oriented events like the Consumer Electronics Show.

However, in 1995, the Interactive Digital Software Association—the trade group created to represent gaming publishers that we spoke about previously in File #002—decided it was time that the video game industry had its own show, and E3 was born. E3—or more officially, the Electronic Entertainment Expo—was a chance for both software and hardware developers to come show their wares to folks from both retail and media. In fact, as E3 grew, it became one of the most dominant events for video games in the country, and revealing new products ended up becoming one of the hallmarks of each year's show (not to mention one of the show's most anticipated moments). Microsoft's pet project Xbox Live, for example, was fully unveiled and named at E3 2002, and the entire line-up of seventh-generation consoles—the Nintendo Wii, the Xbox 360, and the PlayStation 3—were all shown for the first time in one form or another at E3.

As the video game industry grew, so too did E3. With the exception of two years (1997 and 1998) when E3 was hosted in Atlanta, GA, E3 was a yearly event in sunny L.A., and each year's event saw more visitors than the previous years. The growing rise in popularity of E3, unfortunately, would also help in its downfall. As the amount of people attending each event grew, the scene on the show floor grew more chaotic and crowded, and companies found the costs associated with created booths to properly promote their games to be rising beyond levels that made sense for them.

This resulted in the announcement after the end of E3 2006 that the show was to be completely reworked. For a few years, E3 continued on as a lower-key, much smaller-scale, to the delight of some and the chagrin of others. For E3 2009, however, the ESA is promising a much bigger show, one that returns more to the glory days of the event's past.

WiiFit Session Ends in Tragedy

File this one under the "sad but true" department. The Telegraph reported in March that gamer Tim Eves, a twenty-five year old British laborer, collapsed while jogging in place using WiiFit. Though his girlfriend and friend tried to revive him, he was declared dead on arrival to the hospital. The cause of death was yet to be determined at this writing, but preliminary reports suggest that Eves was a victim of Sudden Adult Death Syndrome, as scary a moniker there is for a Syndrome, in our opinion—and had nothing to do with the use of WiiFit. Eves was in shape, was a scout leader, and played drums in a rock and roll band. Play sends out its condolences.

J-List Theater
001: Nii-san Shock
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Aya ...
We... We can't do this.
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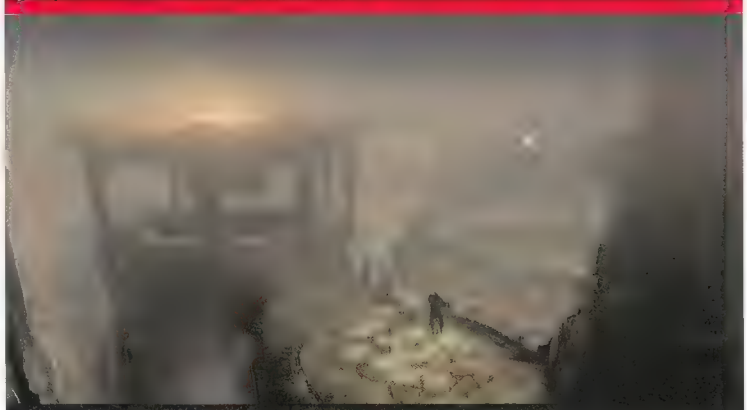
Dante's Inferno Gets Animated



Dante would be proud. And probably bemused when he sees the pop-culture results. His ancient poem is now being made into a animated feature film, courtesy of EA and Starz Media's Film Roman. Film Roman's Joe Goyetta (*Dead Space: Downfall*) is producing, while Victor Cook (Spider-Man, Hellboy) is directing, with writing credits going to Brandon Auma of *Iron Man: Armored Adventures* fame.

Little Big Crocheting

What better inspiration for crochet than the adorable and inimitable Sackboy from Little Big Planet? There have been many real-world takes on Sony's little sack that could, but few are as inspired as the ones you can see on gaming UI artist Maggie Wang's personal website, found here at www.maggiewang.com. "I really liked the idea of making my own character toys out of nothing more than yarn and a bit of ingenuity instead of buying a mass-produced action figure or collectible that hundreds of other folks might have," says Wang. After revisiting her old crochet skills taught by her grandmother as a child, Wang says she fell in love with Sackboy when a PS3-fiend co-worker at n-Space introduced her to Little Big Planet. "I started bringing in my dolls to work in the office during my lunch break, and my fellow game developers would suggest other characters besides the basic brown guy to make, including the Spock and Hellboy dolls."

The Train Man, Part 2

Japan Today passed along a story about a man and a train. Late March: A man playing a cellphone game on a crowded Saikyo Line train is asked to stop playing the game by a female co-passenger. He punches her in the face, is arrested, and then punches her again at the police station. Think of it as a sequel to Densha Otoko, except instead of the nerdy man falling in love with a model, he breaks her jaw.

Hope Springs Interactive

words Brandon Justice

Generally speaking, I think industry-wide events are pretty frickin' important.

Despite all the risk involved in turning one's talent loose in a sea of sharing, shouting, and selective seduction, I can't help but feel that events like DICE, E3, and SXSW are one of the few worthwhile weapons in our war against convention, and in that sense, we need all the help we can get.

So why the sudden sentimentality?

I had the good fortune of being a part of the latest Game Developer's Conference, and I can honestly say that it left me with a renewed sense of hope for some light at the end of the tumultuous tunnel of time and talent that is modern game development.

The 2009 show marks the fifth time I've made my way to the Bay for what's arguably the industry's best attempt at an open forum for developers of all shapes and sizes, and each passing year sees the show push us one step closer to something important. Not because the talks are consistently mind-blowing (which they often aren't), or because the industry's best and brightest unleash their secret sauce on the masses (which they rarely do), but more because of the fact that, when it comes to maturity as a medium, we're just *so far* behind the curve when compared to other entertainment avenues, that even an inconsistent attempt at evolution is better than nothing.

"In gaming? Despite some earnest efforts to the contrary, there just isn't a great deal of information sharing."

Reason being? Like Gotham City, this industry is in serious need of an organizational enema. Simply put, we need some way to help point our developmental resources in the right direction or we may never get over this hump.

You see, in movies, music, and television, there are certain aspects of what they do that are common knowledge for anyone who is "in the biz."

In gaming?

Despite some earnest efforts to the contrary, there just isn't a great deal of information sharing. There aren't a ton of "best practice" pipelines folks can rally around, and in general, companies keep core talent under lock and key as often as they're able.

That said, I experienced a lot of things at this year's Game Developer's Conference that remind me of both how far we've come, and how far we have to go. I saw amazing technology that could help unglue the shoddy framework through which we publish product. I cringed as perfectly competent designers said they didn't know what fun was. I rambled and ranted with people with much greater sway in this business that somehow shared the exact same frustrations. I sat stunned in a room full of game makers pretending to agree with the notion that what we do is too wide and broad to define. I then laughed my ass off when a friend told them they were all full of shit. I learned a ton about how many folks get it done, why many folks do it in the first place, and even why others think game designers are single-handedly limiting the emotional expansion of the field.

Some of it was awesome, some of it was embarrassing, and some of it was just flat-out ignorant—but all of it was worthwhile. I say this because, no matter how many opinions you encounter on a given topic, it's always comforting to know that there are a lot of intelligent, eager folks pushing against the exact same problems you face day-in and day-out.

The thing is, when you're in the middle of all the marvel and madness that is an industry gathering, it's an easy thing to miss. Just like the iPhone retail channel, there's a lot of noise. There's also a lot of shitty advice. And yeah, there is a *lot* of beer.

But...if you look close enough, and really *really* think about how the information you consume, both good and bad, applies to what you do, you forget for a moment that the current industry model is needlessly bound to reinventing the technological wheel. You forget the desire to laugh at the PR rep who ironically asks a press panel why they don't do more investigative reporting. You find yourself getting excited about things like efficient implementation pipelines and the painless marriage of lightweight clients with your existing data structures and the time they'll save you. Time you can spend on making your games better. You see what the IGF brings to the table and volume of new ideas out there and your head starts to hurt with the sort of sweet sensation typically reserved for a post-Slurpee brain freeze.

But like all growing pains, the anger, ache and angst also comes with a glimmer of glee at the thought that, eventually, we just might get this whole thing sorted out. And I'll admit that there's a lot of things that need work. The content is frequently inconsistent, PR tends to tent it up like Barnum and Bailey, recruiters relentlessly cruise the halls with all their marrow-munching might, and yeah, many see them as one big experiment in the realm of developer drunkenness, but to me, they'll always be something more.

Some folks see trade shows as an opportunity for escape. Some see it as a break from the perpetual grind that is content creation. But for anyone carrying a real torch for the taking what we do to the next level, industry gatherings will always be about learning how to take what you do and doing it better.

In that sense, GDC and other shows like it will always eclipse the intended inhibitors of the money-wielding masters we all serve. They're an odd, intense assault on the senses that always help remind folks that, despite the spectrum of personalities and preferences present at the average show, we really are all in this together.

Once we all agree on that point, the rest of it will become markedly less difficult.

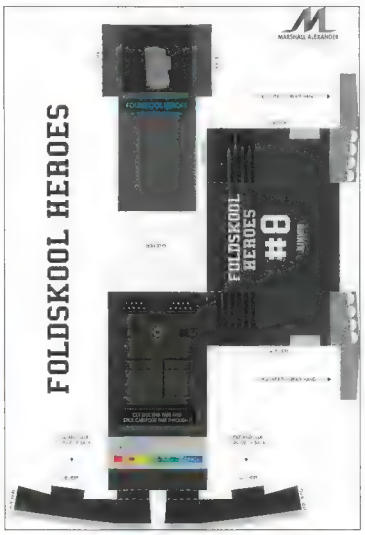
Nice thought, isn't it?

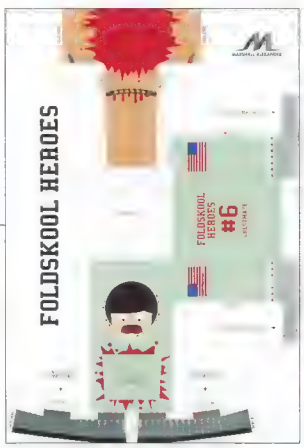
Brandon Justice currently works on making it less lame as a design geek for the fine folks at Quick Hit Sports. Feel free to send your excuse for missing the show to bjustice@quickhit.com.

Gaming Culture

Paper Play

In this new age of environmental responsibility, there's pretty much nothing cooler than papercraft toys. So get familiar with the Foldskool Heroes: these classic gaming companions include a Commodore 64, a 2600, and a Pong arcade machine. All they require is a printer, some decently hefty paper stock, and a little bit of folding patience. Easiest friends you'll ever make! http://marshallalexander.net/





Will Make Beats for Games

Kanye West may rap about girls, money and fame, but deep down he's a nerd just waiting to get out. Last month he told Esquire about how he initially got into music, and the results might be surprising.

"First beat I did, was in seventh grade, on my computer. I got into doing beats for the video games I used to try to make," he told the magazine. "My game was very sexual. The main character was, like, a giant penis. It was like Mario Brothers, but the ghosts were, like, vaginas. Mind you, I'm 12 years old, and this is stuff 30-year-olds are programming. You'd have to draw in and program every little step-it literally took me all night to do a step, 'cause the penis, y'know, had little feet and eyes."

Damacy Dunk

It's been a few years since the game first penetrated the public consciousness, but Katamari Damacy is still floating in the cultural ether. Witness these custom Nike Dunks, immaculately painted with designs inspired by Keita Takahashi's modern-day classic. They're not for sale—the creator, Steve, actually designed them for his girlfriend—but knowing they exist should make you happy enough.

iPhone GAMING

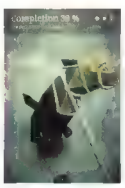
words Evan Shamoon

iPhone Turns 3.0

As you've undoubtedly already heard from the Apple-obsessed tech press, iPhone's 3.0 software update is slated for release this summer. And while we're excited about tethering our phones to our laptops for Internet access and the long-awaited cut-and-paste, what does the update mean for gamers?

Well for one thing, the update opens up real multiplayer action: Two iPhones will be able to discover each other using Bluetooth, and then start a Wi-Fi connection transparently. In addition to allowing players to send and receive pop-up games invites in real time, it will let them chat in-game.

Beyond these new multiplayer capabilities, games will also be able to take full advantage of iPhone 3.0's other major new feature: the availability of new downloadable content purchasable entirely in-app—downloadable levels, items, and features will now be at your fingertips. Let's just hope this doesn't mean we're going to drown in a sea of micro-transactions and money requests from all of our games.



Primrose

It's been a big month for iPhone games. At the top of the heap is Zen Bound, which involves wrapping various shapes of blocks, birds, and various other things in a paint-soaked rope in order to cover them with paint. It's an incredibly meditative experience, and easily one of the best games yet to come out for the platform. Also worth noting are Primrose, the latest game from Passage creator Jason Rohrer, as well as iDracula, which despite having the worst name in the history of names, is probably the most playable shooter to hit iPhone yet.

Facebook Phones Home

The big iPhone news out of South By Southwest is that we'll be getting Facebook connectivity on the device's forthcoming update. Essentially, this means that developers can now integrate your iPhone activities with those on Facebook, like telling your friends which games you're playing, what your high scores are, and more. It already has the Agency, Bejeweled, Bump, Electric Dance, and Tap Tap Revenge 3 ... and more is to come with the official games soon.

Block 005:
Who's Going Down?

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

> "After some minutes, it begins to dawn on you that the elevator is just for show."

Vacation at last. You check into a hotel in a far-off land. It's a luxurious affair, catered to tourists. The aura of culture and exoticism drips from every facade. You lug your luggage to the elevator door and whack the button.

The elevator itself is an ornate, bronze-maybe, contraption, open on two sides so you can watch it rise and fall. It reaches the lobby, gives a bing, and the engraved doors part to reveal a sturdy lattice between you and the carriage. You look for a handle or a latch or a button; you can find no way to bypass the grate. As you puzzle, you hear another bing; the door closes, and the carriage rises away.

The clerk notices your distress, and in perfectly amicable English comes to your aid. You ask him if there's something wrong with the elevator. His eyebrows form erect semicircles. Why, he asks; have you a problem?

You explain that you had trouble with the elevator. You couldn't get the gate open, you say. What gate, he asks. The gate in front of the elevator, you say. The doors open, and there's a gate there. Yes, he agrees, there is. How do you open it, you ask. Open what, he asks. The gate, you say. You want to open the gate? He asks. Well, yes, you say. Why would you want to open the gate? He asks. So you can get on the elevator, you say. Get on the elevator? The clerk scowls. What do you mean, *get on* the elevator? You mean get on the elevator, you say.

After some minutes, it begins to dawn on you that the elevator is just for show. Every building must have an elevator, the clerk explains. People like to press the buttons, you see. It makes the carriage go up and down. Is this a local thing, you wonder. Oh no, he says. They all do that. So old-fashioned! The tourists love it! Actually, so do the locals. They all talk about the elevators here!

Yes, you reply. You imagine they do. Bemused, you drag your valise up the fourteen flights and write the episode off as a unique "cultural" experience. Cultural like a Thai restaurant in Kansas City.

Eighteen days later, your vacation ends. Back in your complicated life, you find yourself on a job interview at RotCorp Towers. You pass the security desk and stroll to the elevator bank. There you find two sets of doors, side-by-side, each with its own set of buttons. More obvious is the small throng hovering near the doors. Busy business, this.

As you approach, you notice a tension in the air. Before each door stands a man, tapping the call button as if his life depended on it. The crowd stands back a pace, watching the floor numbers as they descend: 5, 4, 3, 2... The men hammer all the more frantically. The man on the right looks a bit dizzy; beads of sweat form on the back of his neck.

There is a bing, and the door on the left opens to reveal an impassible grate. Behind the bars is a busty woman in a red velvet jacket and cap. She gives a thumbs-up and a wink; the crowd cheers, and the man on the left pumps his fist. The door closes, and the elevator begins to rise again. The man on the right slinks off, the elevator lights dim, and slowly the crowd disperses.

You take the stairs, and are late to your interview. You mean to ask about the elevators, yet your interviewer is so stern that you daren't irritate her further. Regardless, you do get the job—which means moving to the city. Your whole life is in turmoil, yet on the Internet you find a nice, modern building. It's a negligible commute, and reasonable rent for fair space. Based on the photos, you call the landlord and snap it up.

On moving day, you arrive with your rented van, ready to tote all your worldly possessions to your third-floor flat—furniture and all. It's a gorgeous building in a good part of town. Overlooking a park, even. You go to the elevator, hit the button, and wait. There's a bing, and the door opens—to reveal a brick wall. On the wall are the words "YOU WIN!" in friendly bubble letters. Now thoroughly flustered, you find the resident manager and bang on his door. There's coughing and grumbling; the door opens, to reveal a sour, unshaven man in a wifebeater.

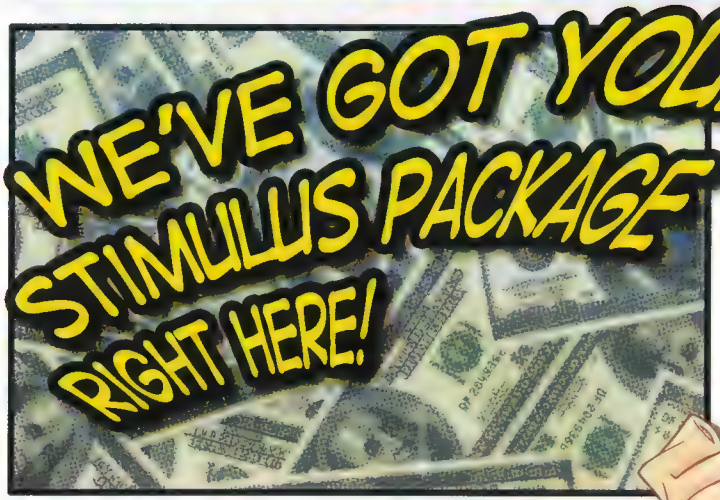
You introduce yourself. You're the new tenant, you say. What's the deal with the elevator? The man glowers at you. You explain about the brick wall. "Well, what did you expect?" He asks. "You know how much space those shafts take up? You want closet space or what?" You ask how you're supposed to get your furniture up to your apartment. "That's your problem," he says. "Ain't nobody complained before." You find that hard to believe. "Look," he sighs, "It's a perfectly good elevator. We got competitions every week. It ain't fancy like the ones with the high-def screens back there, but it's just as much fun."

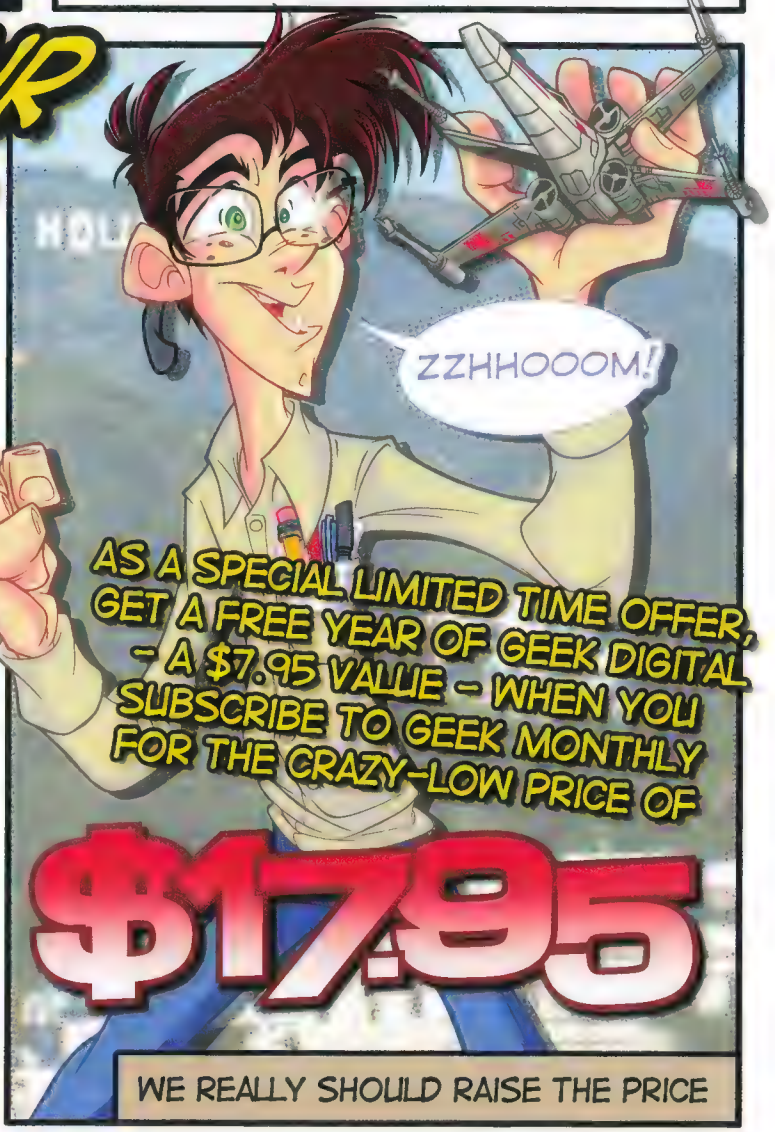
You have no idea what the man is talking about. "Well, they're neat, ain't they?" What does he mean. "Elevators—you got to admit they're fun. They go up, they go down, the lights move. When your elevator comes, you feel like a winner—all the more so if it gets there before the next guy's. Why you think people keep hittin' those buttons over and over? It's 'cause they know it makes the elevators come faster."

It's hard to tell if the man is joking. You concede that there may be some visceral appeal, but elevators are meant to get you from point A to point B so you can get on with your life. They're meant as tools, not as an end unto themselves. There are thousands of ways a person can amuse himself, if he wants to. What's the point of stripping out the utility of something so fundamentally useful, just for the sake of entertainment?

The man stares at you for a moment. Eventually he grunts. "Don't be pretentious," he says. Then he slams the door in your face.

THE FORCES OF EVIL THREATEN TO CRIPPLE US FINANCIALLY!

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NPD GROUP

DATABASE

MAY 2009

Congratulations to Capcom! Street Fighter IV sold close to a million copies in its first 2 weeks on sale and is approaching the 2 million mark in the US alone. Now that's a resurgence!

NPD Group's U.S. Video Games Industry Sales –Feb.

	Feb 08 YTD	Feb 09
Video Games	$1.34B	$1.47B 10%
Video Games Hardware	$481.4M	$532.7M 11%
Video Games Software	$673.3M	733.5M 9%
Video Games Accessories	$182.8M	$207.1M 13%

Hardware Units

01	Wii	753K
02	Nintendo DS	588K
03	Xbox 360	391K
04	PlayStation 3	276K
05	PSP	199K

Top 10 SKUs February 2009

01	Wii Fit w/ Balance Board	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII	644K
02	Street Fighter IV	CAPCOM USA	360	446K
03	Street Fighter IV	CAPCOM USA	PS3	403K
04	Wii Play w/ Remote	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII	386K
05	Killzone 2	SONY	PS3	323K
06	Wii Mario Kart with wheel	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII	263K
07	Call of Duty: World at War	ACTIVISION BLIZZARD	360	193K
08	Mario Kart DS	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	NDS	145K
09	New Super Mario Bros	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	NDS	144K
10	Guitar Hero World Tour	ACTIVISION BLIZZARD	WII	136K

RANDOM NUMBERS

Afro Samurai (360/PS3) sold over 100,000 copies in its first 6 days fastest-selling anime game ever? (we're checking)

Wario Land Shake It (Wii) Total sales July-Dec. 08: 87k - Sales to date Feb.'09: 192,000 more great news for 2D fans! Keep it going!

Banjo Kazooie Nuts & Bolts (Xbox360) Sales have stalled at 170,000 can we have the old Rare back now, please?

De Blob (Wii) Has sold over 257,000 to date guess we weren't the only ones who loved the sticky gameplay!

Welcome to the all-new

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Our biggest and best web project yet: the all-new **play** online, your complete source for games, anime, media, and more on the internet. We've worked hard to bring you an amazing website, one packed not only with the thought-provoking and inciteful written content you've come to expect from **play** magazine, but also a whole list of exciting new features.

Here's a small sample of what you'll find on the new **play** online:

explorer

Find your way in a sea of confusion with the **play** online explorer, our revolutionary new section that guides you to only the best of what's out there. You don't have the chance to check out everything there is to see, what's worth your time and what isn't, so the experts at **play** be your guides to the best of the best.

Smart Searching

We've rebuilt our site engine from the ground up, giving you the vastly more powerful than you can possibly imagine when it comes to searching for and finding the latest reviews, news, game releases, or whatever else you want.

Visual Delights

At play, we've always considered the visual side of what we do just as important as our writing. For the new play online, you'll not only find exclusive videos and trailers, but also the Imagestream, the only true search engine for screenshots, production art, and more.

the feed

A sampling of the exclusive content recently featured on **play** onlin

The Uncut BlazBlue Discussion

Get the full-length version of Heather and Eric's discussion on not only BlazBlue, but the entire state of the fighting game genre. (search: "blazblue discussion")

The Mad World of PlatinumGames

Matt Williamson takes a special look at PlatinumGames in honor of the recent release of MadWorld for the Wii. (search: "platinumgames")

Talking Shop with Jimmy Palmiotti

play online gets a special interview with comic writer Jimmy Palmiotti, as we talk Power Girl, the Last Resort, and more. (search: "jimmy palmiotti")

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BRÜTAL LEGEND

Of Gods and Rockers

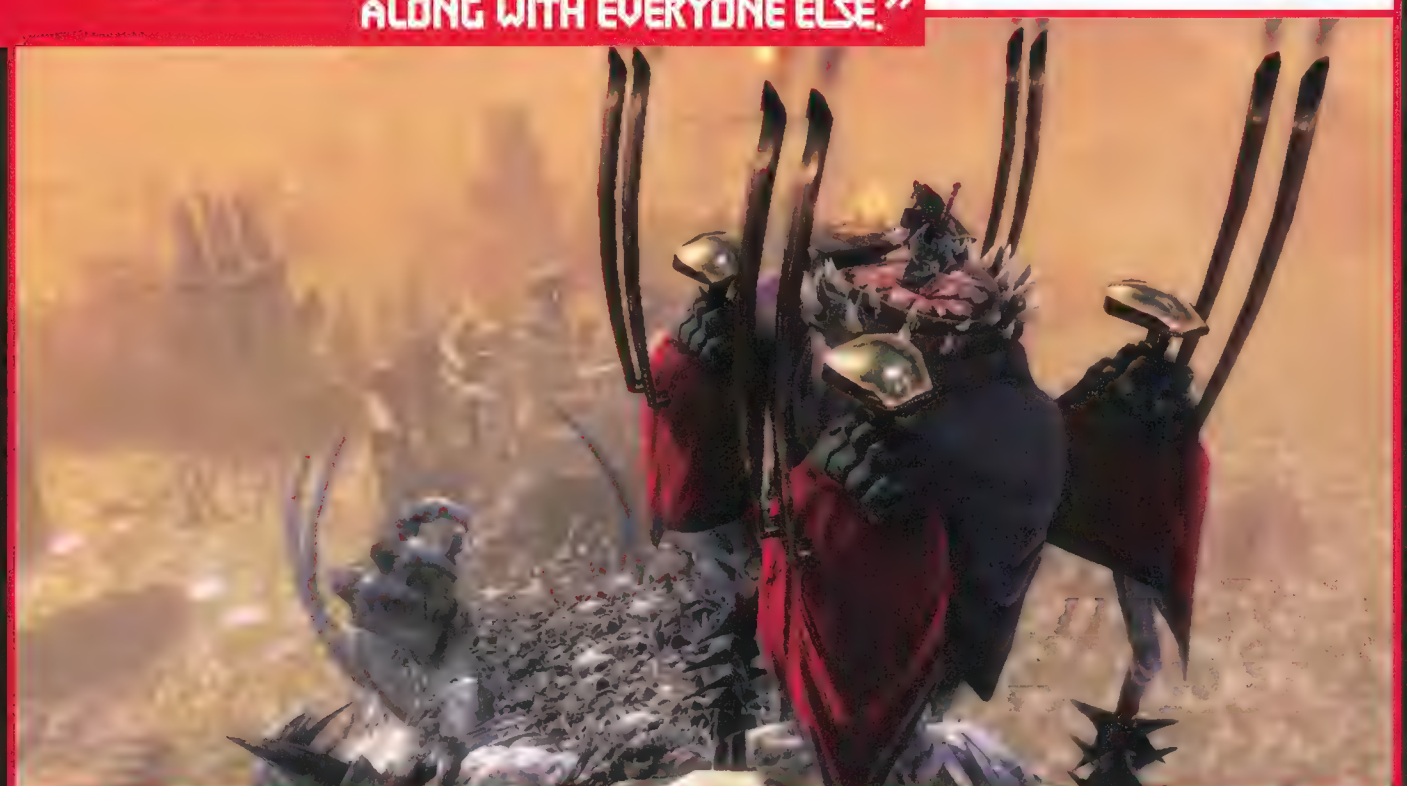
words Dave Halverson

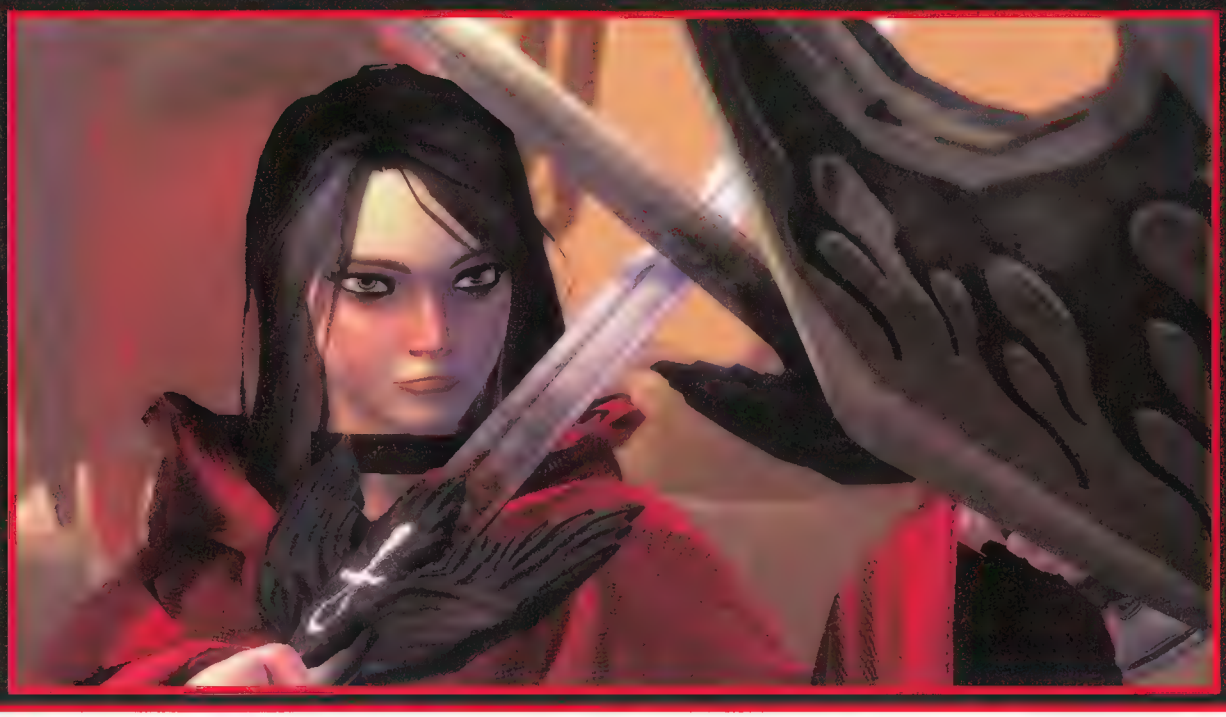
I attended 1st through -8th grade at St. Catherine's of Sienna Catholic School. If you've ever seen *Boogie Nights*, you can see it in the background just before Dirk Diggler gets his comeuppance in a mini-truck towards the end of the film (after that rendition of "The Touch," he deserved a good thrashing). That's where my metal dreams were forged, as my fragile little mind was filled with mystical tales of talking serpents, ancient rituals, rivers of blood, and the root of all evil—that red-skinned devil himself, Satan. Had it not come from soft-spoken nuns in full-length black tunics draped to the ground and winged headpieces, it may not have taken hold, but back then Catholic school was like something out of Hogwarts. Just add Black Sabbath and you've got yourself a 12-year-old disciple of the Licorice Pizza.

The '70s and early '80s were, in my opinion, the true "metal" years. Bands like Judas Priest, Scorpions, Led Zeppelin, Metallica, Rush (if you dug the Prog; I did), Deep Purple, KISS, Mötley Crüe, Motörhead, Aerosmith, and Guns N' Roses didn't just make great records; they were like gods. You'd go on a pilgrimage to see a concert and emerge from the experience somehow better; empowered. But by the time grunge rolled around the metal monster had started looking more like a tinfoil ballerina and the beast was slain. It didn't matter much though, because soon after, I got video games! How long could it possibly take for somebody to immortalize those magical years? Twenty years later…

Tim Schafer knows a thing or two about the metal himself. What's more important though, is that Tim also happens to be a maverick game designer in an era when there are precious few maverick game designers. The days of elaborate games that don't fit neatly into a specific category aimed at a specific demographic are long gone, at least on the level of a Brütal Legend. There are plenty of budding, visionary game designers out there cutting their teeth on downloadable games, which bodes well for the future (if they can find equally visionary publishers), but in the world of big budget 7th-generation epics, Tim Schafer and his Double Fine studio are one of a kind. They have both the tools and the talent to go their own way, and it's a good thing because I don't care who

"IT'S NOT A GAME MADE 'FOR' METAL FANS AS MUCH A GAME THAT METAL FANS WILL LOVE, ALONG WITH EVERYONE ELSE."





you are, the odds of getting a major publisher to back a big, expensive, elaborate, open-world action-adventure that hits on multiple genres based on a roadie who's transported to a world of metal created by legendary titans by way of a belt buckle that transforms into a fire beast to organize a head banger army to free humanity from a demon god are, well, they're not good. ...Unless you happen to be a renowned game designer with your own studio, and even then this is not an easy game to make. Too "metal" and you lose the masses; too restrained and you lose the core. Hence, this is why it's never been done. The best video games are inside people's heads. The difference between them staying there for eternity and becoming the next big thing is people like Tim Schafer who happens to be renowned, visionary and in possession of one the finest teams in the great gaming canon. Now that you know how lucky you are, I'll attempt to put my experience playing Brütal Legend for the first time into words.

PRELUDE TO WAR

Before handing the magic control device over to a member of the press for the first time—thus fulfilling *my* prophecy—Tim describes Eddie, his Meatloaf meets Jack Black protagonist, as a roadie out of time—a master of his craft who constructs behemoth stages worthy of epic metal shows, stuck in an era of commercial nü metal rubbish. But that doesn't stop Eddie from constructing his elaborate medieval stages, even though the posers he's working for flat-out don't get it. The story begins after this particular Stonehenge-like stage comes crashing down, as blood from Eddie's injuries leak into the maw of his belt buckle, unleashing the fire-beast Ormaggöden and a one-way ticket to the world where metal was born. Eddie finds himself on a stage that looks eerily similar to the one he just left, save for the heaps of skulls and bones where the audience used to be and the bloodthirsty druids shrouded in red that want to render his game over, but will have to settle for introducing me to Eddie's moves. The first order of business is grabbing the sacred broad axe the druids are guarding, known forthwith as the Separator. Eddie managed to hang on to his guitar Clementine too, which you soon find out

is good for more than playing the "Smoke on the Water" riff in this bold new world. Launching pyro and lightning attacks with the guitar, charging the axe to cut through blocks and doubling up to stun and decapitate the decrepit onslaught comes quick and easy. Eddie can lock-on, strafe, and evade, and feels taut and connected to the world right out of the gate.

All the while, Jack Black is Eddie—it's uncanny, it sounds like he's actually in the model—and everything in the environment, which resembles a massive beast—from piles of skeletal remains to the clusters of lit candles—all boast real-time collision. Tim hadn't locked down the song selection yet, but if the placeholder track was any indication (and it was), as a fan I literally couldn't be happier. That said, I don't believe that the music will define Brütal Legend as much as the story, character design and gameplay itself. It's not a game made "for" metal fans as much as a game that metal fans will love, along with everyone else.

Emerging from the would-be stage onto the mountain of skeletal remains where the parking lot used to be, you begin to realize the scope of the game. The scene itself resembles something out of the pages of Heavy Metal (Tim cites Frank Frazetta as an influence and it definitely shows) as Eddie begins the slow descent on one of the game's many unequivocally "metal" creatures, called a Bishop Walker. This is easily one of the most amazing panoramas I have ever seen. The remains roll and slide as the beast lumbers down the boney trail, surrounded by rolling seas

Time to start a revolution and hit the road... Or not. It's your call.

crashing against sunken ruins. These are the kinds of moments that gamers live for.

After a brief run-in with your first Battle Nun (Marilyn Manson would approve) Eddie meets Ophelia (voiced spectacularly by Jennifer Hale from Mass Effect) and it's love at first sight; at least it was for me. Disguised as a druid, the moment she pulled back her hood I knew that the story was going be as good as everything else was already looking. Seldom has a face spoken such volumes. I love seamless real-time storytelling, but I'm also totally creeped out by Chiclets teeth, frozen plastic hair, over-saturated skin tones and everything else that comes with 95% of in-game models trying to imitate life. Doublefine's art direction strikes the perfect balance between real and exaggerated, producing characters that look perfectly authentic to their world rather than trying to emulate ours.

After your initial conversation with Ophelia, who was on her way to grab the Separator that Eddie is so naturally wielding, she becomes an element of the gameplay, hopping onto Eddie's shoulders concert-style (minus the fan service) for a spinning tandem attack—one of many as you engage in battle with Brütal Legend's various females. The ensuing battle also introduces Eddie's Grand Slam—a guitar/axe combo using Clementine to pop enemies into the air, followed by the The Separator to send them flying. After you've launched your last flying nun, it's on to the Motorforge, where Eddie surmises they've stumbled upon fertile ground and applies a bit of metal fertilizer by way of the games first guitar solo (controls TBA), the Relic Raiser, giving rise "literally" to the parts for the Deuce. Bear in mind the game has just started, and you've already got the girl—well, one of the girls—and a mean hot rod which is yours to keep and upgrade with armor and weapons throughout

"ALL THE WHILE JACK BLACK IS EDDIE—IT'S UNCANNY. IT SOUNDS LIKE HE'S ACTUALLY IN THE MODEL..."

the game. The Motor forge is also where you go to spend money, "Lighter Tributes," on your friends, The Separator and Clementine.

If you play a fair amount of games, you know what's coming next, because it comes in every game you've played where you get into a vehicle or any apparatus that requires your brain to shift gears: The obligatory driving tutorial, including such hits as "press left or right to steer" and "press R to accelerate and L to brake," followed by "press start and select options to change your settings." If I can view the settings you reject from Intellivision, why are you interrupting my game!? Wouldn't it be great if for once you just got in and started driving? Or why not just battle a 100- ft. all-tentacle boss, in the car! This is why I get so excited playing visionary games. Playing back my recording to refresh my memory, I'm pretty sure this is where I turned to Tim and spouted one of four or five of the most bone-headed expletives, such as "you are the

polar opposite of Dancing with the Stars," of all time. I knew this game was going to wreck me! Battling the Lamp Ray in the Deuce, with Ophelia, after Eddie made some remark about its breath, and I believe French kissing standing toe to Lamp as thick slobber oozed around its gigantic maw was more than I could handle—10, 15 minutes max into the game. Speeding across a bridge under heavy fire, avoiding creatures dropping massive pendulums crushing the road as I narrowly roared by, seemed a perfectly apropos way to end the first act…until I found out it was just the intro. Next stop Bladehenge.

MEET THE HALFORDS

Arriving at Bladehenge, the center of the human resistance, Eddie meets Lars and Lita Halford—Lars looks and acts like your typical '80s rock star and Lita makes you wish you were tiny and rendered—who brief the strange newcomer on the situation: The evil emperor Doviculus and his demon army The Tainted Coil are systematically enslaving humanity, sending the men to work in the mines and the women to his decadent Pleasure Towers. They've been fighting for their survival the best they can, but lack organization and direction. In other words, they need a roadie; and just like the prophecy said (they hope) they got one. Before exiting Bladehenge, a quick jaunt around the compound reveals more crazy detail such as surface textures peeled away, exposing rock poster textures underneath, and a decidedly old-world meets Woodstock tactility. But there is work to do. Can't go to war without an army, and since the men have been taken to the mines, that's where Eddie and Lars will start. Leaving Bladehenge, the first inkling of an actual menu of any kind appears lower left. Written in the font I used to copy off the sides of Funny Cars, it reads, "Start a Revolution: Now or Later." I nearly begin to weep.

Once you step outside of Bladehenge, it's pretty clear that Brütal Legend isn't the pseudo-linear action-adventure the intro lead you to be-

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lieve; but it becomes crystal clear after you solo in front of the stone slab that hails The Deuce and begin driving around the open Metal world. A single plume of light marks your destination (provided you selected "Now"), otherwise the way is clear; no barriers or prodding to go here or there. There are roads, and ancient signposts, but nothing to suggest order. The countryside is dotted with giant stone swords, phallic symbols, shiny exhaust pipe trees, massive bone arches, active volcanoes, fields of beer kegs, and on and on. At one point Tim sees a strange red flower (among many) and has me stop, and walk over to it. "Now play the Relic Raiser solo." Seconds later a hidden monument adorned with a winged demon and giant skull rumbles out of the ground. "Those are all over the place" he say's casually. "That's one way of getting new metal to play in The Deuce." Tim also points out that many of the random scuffles and anonymous natives I've seen here and there trigger side missions, and admiring the strange metal on mammal wildlife, he has me chase one down… "press Y and you should be able to ride it." I do, I am, and it's really fun. "We just threw a lot of that in there; I thought it would be fun." This man has no idea how far outside the status quo he is hovering. I feel sorry for anyone who doesn't experience this game. On to the mines…

Welcome to the world: Where are the priests of the temple of syrinx?

Arriving at the mines, it's obvious that the head honcho of Hair Metal, General Lionwhyte (voiced by legendary Judas Priest front man

Rob Halford) has done a bang-up job of enslaving the head bangers, seeing as how they're chipping away at solid rock...with their heads! After more great dialogue (I'm grazing the surface; Eddie rarely stops talking or thinking out loud), Eddie grabs Clementine and plays the Battle Cry solo, and the revolution begins: Eddie controls his army using three simple commands on the D-pad; follow (attacking anything in range), stay put and defend, or you can simply point them in the direction of whatever you want them to go nut-shit on, and attack. The majority of mine liberation is homage to a classic metal song that I wouldn't want to spoil even if it was official. Just know that it works.

The way out of the mines runs through many machinations, including the Pit Boss (see the large man with many spikes) where we get our first taste of Brütal Legend's cleverly staged boss battles.

Returning to Bladehenge, all is not well. While Eddie was off recruiting grunts, Ophelia was on a mission of her own liberating a group of runaways, and is badly injured. She needs a healer, fast. At this point it feels like I've been playing maybe an hour and I'm hanging on every word as if I was were mid way though a JRPG. When Lars casually suggests leaving her to die for the greater good, I sense the rabbit hole getting deeper. Of course Eddie's not havin' it, and we're off to see The Killmaster (nice name

"BEAR IN MIND THE GAME HAS JUST STARTED, AND YOU'VE ALREADY GOT THE GIRL...AND A MEAN HOT ROD WHICH IS YOURS TO KEEP..."

for healer). After a bit of a haul up a windy pass, as his grotto comes into view he looks a lot like Lemmy from Motörhead. I was never a huge Motörhead fan but everyone knows Lemmy. Who knew his last name was Kilmister? There he was in rendered flesh and down to the mole. If Lemmy pops up in the first couple of hours, I can only imagine who waits as Tim takes us through the many genre-defined lands ahead, but for now Lemmy needs special bass guitar strings spun from the backside of the giant Spider Queen.

The gameplay moving through the shallow canyon is becoming steadily more tactical, using Clementine's ranged attack to lock-on, stun, and toggle knocking enemies off of tall rocks, while dealing with the hordes of tiny chrome spiders spewing forth on the ground. It's a great bit of give and take, blocking, dodging and using the head bangers to form a mosh pit around Eddie, or as Tim calls it a "meat shield," to take out any creepy crawlies.

Eddie's on his own versus the giant chrome-plated spider, however, and she proves a worthy adversary. Once every cycle (and she has some moves) you have maybe a second to stun her with a perfectly timed blow to the engine, freezing her long enough to introduce The Separator to her face. In between, failing to eliminate the tiny little healing spiders spawning at her side nullifies the effort, and you need four hits. The Queen was one of the better boss fights I've had in a while, and this is still act 1.

Eddie Riggs and Clementine light up the sky.

Jumping on a trike at this point in the game is more fun than I probably deserve, but time is of the essence and the way back is too tight for The Deuce. You're timed on this one, so don't be like me and not notice for 30 seconds because the thing is so fun to ride. Fortunately, it handles like a dream too, and Ophelia is back with us (you'll never guess who made sure he was by her side when she came to, to take all the credit) along with The Killmaster. Just one more stop to make before the first chapter in Brütal Legend comes to a close, and the big picture finally comes into view. On the way, we stop off to pick up the runaways and herd enough Fire Hogs for Ophelia to build them massive cannons out of their metal snouts (Herdy Gerdy makes me smile) and Mangus

"JUMPING ON A TRIKE AT THIS POINT IN THE GAME IS MORE FUN THAN I PROBABLY DESERVE, BUT TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE..."

finally shows up with the tour bus. Pulling into what looks like the perfect open-field for a massive rock show, Tim reveals the final piece of the Chapter 1 puzzle—stage battles. Eddie sees it as clear as day... The plumes of ether rising into the sky; those are fans! Take care of the fans and they'll take care of you. As Eddie springs into action building his fans a stage we're about to come full circle. Remember all those bones? Wow, I love where this is going. Standing next to the "fans," Eddie plays the Fan Tribute solo and up from the ground rise giant merchandise ("merch") towers. The stage is set; time to recruit. Using the D-pad to recruit runaways, head bangers, or fire boars, as you select each, they come stage diving onto the field until finally I'm standing there in front of stacks of Marshall amps, surrounded by beautiful groupies—one, of course, on my shoulders—a throng of head bangers and a half dozen or so Fire Boars, and 4 towering displays packed with quality concert goods. It's something to see. Off in the distance General Lionwhyte, hovering with his flowing locks of shiny hair and his Hair Metal army are approaching. "Protect the stage! Lionwhyte's groupies are attacking your merch tower! Recruit more head bangers..." I can hear Tim, but none of it's registering. I'm too busy popping off heads of hair, chasing Lionwhyte (that's Rob Halford!) and spending way too much time watching my runaways and Fire Boars commit foul acts against the sparkling makeup-saturated brood. My stage is burning... "You're stage is burning!!" At that moment I realized that Tim really wanted me to win, unaware that ninety-percent of my being was still trying to process what I saw back at Bladehenge. I was just happy that I didn't drool or fall over.

TIM SCHAFER NATIONAL TREASURE

Who is this man that does it his way in a world of different variations on the same themes? Tim got his start working for Lucasfilm Games on the Skywalker Ranch, during those magical pioneering days before LucasArts was born and moved into their own game-centric compound. After Tim's work on The Secret of Monkey Island (which prompted series creator Ron Gilbert to turn it into a comedy) he went on to co-design Day of the Tentacle followed by solo projects Full Throttle and Grim Fandango before founding Double Fine Productions in 2000. Double Fine's first game, Psychonauts shattered convention and stands as one of the finest platforming adventures ever created. From all of us at play, thank you Tim!

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Sucker Punch | **Publisher:** SCEA | **Available:** June

Infamous

Summer's *other* pissed-off protagonist

Words Matt Cabral

If you've been following the promising third-person, open-world action game starring an unlikely badass who wakes from a coma to find himself imbued with inhuman powers that he must then use to find the cause of his curse, while tearing a near-future metropolis a new one—then you no doubt can't wait to play Prototype...or Infamous. Yup, just as Hollywood unleashed lava-spitting flicks *Dante's Peak* and *Volcano* within months of each other back in '97, the videogame industry is delivering two titles this summer that, on the surface, appear very similar. But, just as Tommy Lee Jones' man-versus-magma battle differed from Pierce Brosnan's, Infamous' and Prototypes' protagonists are in for two very different rides. We already gave Alex Mercer a chance to strut his shape-shifting stuff in our March issue, so this month we're giving Cole equal time to shock us with his electricity-based skills. We sat with Sucker Punch co-founder—and Infamous producer—Brian Fleming at GDC, where and updated build of the game was being shown, to find out what sets his game apart from the Proto' pack.

"Every day the game gets between 100-300 improvements made to it, those numbers are real."

Interview

Play: The last time we checked in with you guys was at CES, then again at New York Comic Con. Has the game progressed much since then?

Brian Fleming: Oh my God, yes!

Play: Is it finished?

BF: (laughs) No. Every day the game gets between 100-300 improvements made to it, those numbers are real. We've got QA double-shifting, finding lots of bugs that we're fixing, but we've also got what we call "golden tickets;" I get some of these...these aren't gonna stop us from shipping, but we've gotta fix them. These are our way of saying there's got to be a limited amount of shit that we're changing now because we cannot afford to make big mistakes. The marketing and PR teams have done such an amazing job getting this thing ready to launch that we have to make our dates, and we will.

Play: The open-world formula is being done to death these days. How's Infamous gonna stand out from the me-too crowd?

BF: Well, I think there's a few things at its core it does super well: First, it brings a really great climbing system...I'm super proud of it and it really stands on its own once you play it. They've done a really great job in this unbelievably dense environment. There's three games that have tried to do open-world climbing... [Assassin's] Creed, Crackdown and us. Spider-Man does it too, but it's so different and he's got these

natural powers that let him climb up anything...it's really different. What's awesome about us, though, is this: I defy you to play our game for a couple of hours and then walk around outside, and not think about climbing stuff. I defy you to do that...I think it's amazing. The another thing that's great about Infamous is that it's a superhero game with a lot of the DNA of super-heroes in it, but not the golden age super-heroes; I mean the DNA, the "I wanna get powers that I don't understand, and the world will turn against me, and then I have my 'great power, great responsibility' moment." It is a superhero game in all those ways, and it is designed for you to experience all of it...you get to decide if you're going to be a dick or if you're going to be a hero. And the statistics are fascinating to me as an anthropology study of humanity, it's mind-blowing; I never believed Peter Molyneux, but it's totally true—everybody goes good. We'll have instrumentation in the game with trophies to see this, but so far in focus groups it's very clear, which is weird...

Play: I think a lot of gamers—myself included—go good on the first play-through, then evil for the next one.
Absolutely, yes, and that's great!
I love that it's a superhero game that started as a videogame...it didn't start as a linear piece of media. I think it's as close to the true DNA of the superhero apex-type property as you're going to get...and, you know, I have immense respect for the team doing Prototype; Hulk Ultimate Destruction, which they basically built this game off of, is a friggin' awesome game. So those guys are scary as shit to me; I haven't played their game, but man...and then Dave Jones' Crackdown. So, the fact that we're even in this space is scary, but I think one of the things we do so well is we really give you those moments. It's a superhero story and you get to shape it—I love that about this game. We come from doing the Sly games, and if you've played those you know they're a long series of set-ups; set-up where you're going to be shooting a turret or a set-up where you're going to be jumping from lily pad to lily pad, and so on. And there are not a lot of teams that did a lot of set-ups and then went and did an open environment. Lots of guys have done systemic stuff and then done open environments, but we're coming at it from a very different angle. And I think our bridge battles and boss battles and our jail mission are all pretty impressive set-ups inside an open environment...that's pretty cool. Don't get me wrong, there are 100 side-missions that feel exactly like an open environment game, or at least they have the spirit of one. And you can go anywhere, even more literally in our game because you can climb on anything, so it's this incredibly open experience, but there are set-ups in it. I think that's neat...as a geek that makes games, I think it's an interesting angle that we have.

Play: It's funny you mention the climbing aspect first, because so far, the game's marketing angle has really been all about the electricity-based powers. I don't think many people see Infamous as a climbing game.
They're both super important—you can't have one without the other. I don't know how you could make this game without the climbing. You can go anywhere, pretty much with just a stick and an X button. It's like a Wii app.

Play: [laughs]
I'm serious, though...and we're very proud of that. It's not complicated to play, yet it's very powerful, very expressive controls. Again, as a guy who makes games, I'm very proud of the ability to deliver that experience. I don't think it should be marketed as a climbing game, but I think the climbing is something people will take away from it as... "wow!". I believe it's one of the things they're really gonna love about the game, no question about it.

Play: How often are you asked: "What do you think of Prototype?"
[laughs] Every interview.

Play: And you honestly have not played it?
I've watched the video. You know, dude, I'm not even sure I would play it because inevitably you get polluted by stuff you play, and the last thing I wanna do is get polluted by a game that's in our space. I want to go play Fat Princess, and get polluted by that. And I'm not saying Prototype is pollution... I have tremendous respect for those guys. But you want to not see how they've solved the same problem you're solving, so I've kind of tried to avoid it. I'll play it—I'm sure I'll play it—when ours is done and it's done. I'll sit down and play it, check it out of Sucker Punch's library, as I'm sure a lot of us will, and check it out.

Play: Last time I spoke with you, you were not answering any questions on the game's karma system. What can you now tell us about Infamous' good-or-evil mechanic? Are we looking at two very different games depending on which path you choose?
When we approached this problem it really started at the source—the source of wanting to give the player the experience of being a superhero. So the source for us was not the difference between ending up in a happy valley with daisies, if you're good, and if you're evil you end up in a atomic blast crater...that was not what we were doing. We wanted to make the choice meaningful to the player through their play-through, so, for us, it's more about the minute to minute gameplay; every time you're on the street, are people trying to wail on me, or are they cheering for me? When I upgrade my powers, how do they reflect my choices? So, say you've got this power to throw grenades...what should those grenades do if you're an evil guy, what should they do if you're a good guy? Let's make those different because they should reflect what you care about and what you're passionate about; you evolve as a hero, so your powers should evolve along with you. If you're "good" grenades should become more precise or have features that are sub-lethal allowing you to pick and choose who you kill—if I throw one and everyone gets restrained, then I can run in and pick off the bad guys and leave everyone else alone. If you're "evil", screw 'em—I want that thing to fragment into as many little shells as possible and wipe them all out. And that's what the game does; every power allows you to upgrade on the good or evil side, but you need to be fully heroic or fully evil to get the upgrades. Upgrade that grenade on the evil side and get a cluster of seven shock grenades and bigger blast damage—gotta be infamous!—but on the good side, people get restrained not killed—more tactical and helps you be good. That's where we came at this from; how do I make something I just lived not just be something that is just broadcast back to me like they read a different script at the ending?

Play: And Cole will change physically based on his choices?
He will. You wanna meet people's expectations; evil dudes have fucking tattoos and they're all beastie.

I just played a mission where I was killing civilians unintentionally because they were casualties of me trying to keep myself alive..
Oh yeah, that happens, that's part of the game. On some level it's hard to be good, but easy to be evil. That's life. You gotta earn it—people wanna earn it—but when they're evil it's just like eating sugar [does mock evil laugh]. They like that, too. The game has these two sides to it, and that's part of the reason we wanted to make it.

Play: How about some Eater eggs for Sly fans?
[Points to Cole on-screen] He's got a Sly Cooper logo embroidered on his backpack.

Cool, any other such call-outs to Sly?
I can't put too much in because then they'd yell at me.

Play: And we can expect a new Sly Cooper game from Sucker Punch, next?
Something is next. I don't know what...

System: 360, PS3, PC | Developer: Airtight Games | Publisher: Capcom | Available: Summer

Dark Void

Ready to soar...

Words Brady Fiechter

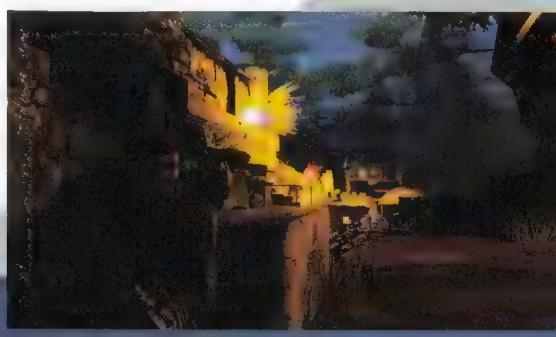
Dark Void may be one of the quieter titles churning through Capcom's 2009 release machine, but it's not for lack of capable potency. No one quite knows [illegible] blueprint for real success, so maybe the fi[illegible] Void needs to project is just how distinct it [illegible] actually is. Producer Shana Br[illegible] point out that "vertical combat [illegible] describe. It's really better to se[illegible]"

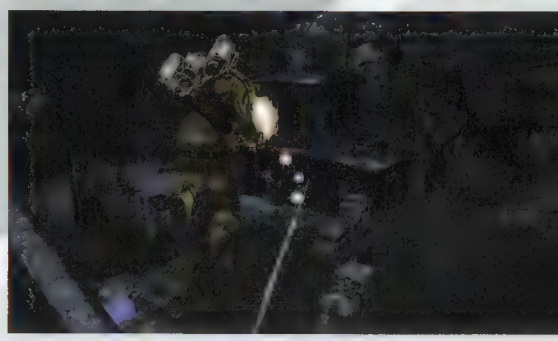
And she's absolutely right. [illegible] duck-and-cover variety, easi[illegible] Gears of War-influenced th[illegible] fan, but what really define[illegible] confrontations is the jet pac[illegible] to your back almost from th[illegible] isn't just shooting upwa[illegible] for enemies from above, [illegible] extend into the sky. Wit[illegible] evolving from a gentle hove[illegible] you can fly from cover p[illegible] enemy positioning and zip th[illegible] desired position. The o[illegible] strategy, your feel for [illegible] sense for a kill. It's really cool, if simply from a visual standpoint, watching the screen change positioning as you drop into the Z axis and send spindly cyborg creatures hurling toward their death while you maintain safety with the burst of your jet pack.

"This is not a flight game," Rivant explains, "it's a game for action fans. If he looks out of control, he really isn't." This is a good point to note when the game turns into more of an aerial combat routine; the character is entirely hand animated, exaggerated and far from stiff in his response to what you might imagine flying open-air at 300-mph would [illegible] Our favorite moments was when our rocket[illegible] [illegible] like alien ship, [illegible] the hull and rips out the pilot to take over [illegible] A grip meter is one mechanic [illegible] as you routinely get caught up in scenarios where hanging on for dear life requires frantic button tapping.

After crash-landing [illegible] the setting [illegible] vaguely [illegible] organic [illegible] Earth, but [illegible] of mystery. [illegible] means, says Rivant. "But we want to give you freedom, reward you for exploring these beautiful worlds we've [illegible] so hard to create." [illegible] ethereal [illegible]

"Feeling like a game is a major"





Punch-Out!!

Boxing at the Next Level

words: Michael Hobbs

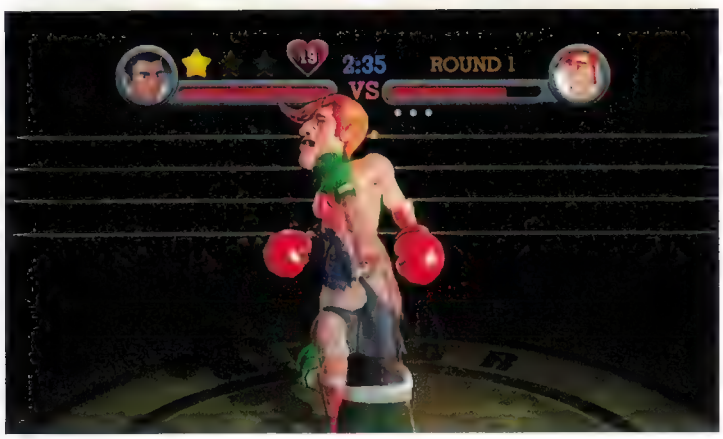
Does something have to be new to be fun? The short answer to that question, perhaps obviously, is no. Case in point is the new Punch-Out!! for Wii. Its core gameplay is little removed from the NES and SNES classics, yet the fun remains, and it's little to do with nostalgia.

Like a lot of Nintendo games, anyone can enjoy this, but those familiar with Punch- Out! will have the advantage in knowing what to expect, and that's something quite different from your standard boxing game. You do not move about the ring, circling your opponent and throwing punches. Rather, you stand in place and react to what your opponent does. This is classic, pattern-based gameplay. Learn your opponents' attacks and punch, dodge, or block at the right time. It sounds and is simple, but within this framework are devious patterns from classic boxers that will have your concentration joyfully maxed-out.

There are different control schemes to choose from in this newest Punch-Out!!. One is a classic, no-frills approach which uses only the Wii Remote held horizontally. This really makes it feel like playing the NES original. The second mode uses the Nunchuck and Remote as you might expect, responding to your punch motions. Things are kept simple, however, and choosing between high, low, and Super punches involves a stick movement or button press, not a different motion. This keeps things feeling nice and responsive, which this game's quick play style demands. Finally, a third mode of control allows the addition of the Wii Balance Board to sense your dodging and ducking. Though this mode certainly worked, I was so poor at it I never wanted to try it again.

After playing the new Punch-Out!! for a few rounds, I was fondly recalling the original. This is a neat trick on developers Next Level's part. The play is classic, fun, and unique because of it in this era. This is one to look forward to.

"After playing the new Punch-Out!! for a few rounds, I was fondly recalling the original."



These pugilists should all look pretty familiar. Unless you've never seen them...

System: PS3, 360 | **Developer:** Square Enix | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **Available:** TBA

hands-on preview

Final Fantasy XIII

Yes, it's real. We've played it.

words Dai Kohama & Nick Des Barres

I remember the first Final Fantasy XIII trailer at E3 2006, and the very real feeling of awe it instilled. How in God's name were those battles going to control? How could any game possibly be so gorgeous? I never imagined it would be a full three years before I finally played it—yet here we are, in 2009. I can actually look back on that trailer with a feeling of nostalgia.

In late March, select US press were invited to play the demo disc being included with the Japanese Blu-ray release of Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Complete, the greatly enhanced "Director's Cut" of Tetsuya Nomura's film. By the time you read this, it'll be spinning in PlayStation 3s across Japan—and probably the US as well, since the console is region free. Was it worth a three year wait? Oh yes. Yes indeed.

The demo, which reportedly begins immediately after the true opening of the game, sets up the massively high-tech city of Cocoon. This is a society that for thousands of years has lived in isolation above the primitive world of Pulse, fusing magic and technology to increase the quality of life for its millions of citizens. Cocoon was said to have been built by the fal'Cie, "an existence beyond human understanding." An imponderable, godlike figure, it routinely selects members of the population—dubbed l'Cie—to perform key tasks it requires. Cocoon's government, known as the Theocracy, indoctrinates its citizens from birth with the notion that Pulse represents an ever-present threat. Citizens that are suspected of having been tainted by its "influence" are exiled, shipped on trains to the world below like so many cattle. It is here the demo begins, with the character of Vanille overlooking the vast plains of Pulse, delivering enigmatic dialogue in flashback: "The thirteen days after I woke were the beginning of the end of the world."

The player is immediately thrust into a now-familiar situation, depicted in the first trailer. Stern, strawberry blonde heroine Lightning is aboard one of those exile-trains, and she's there to bust people out. After a stunning FMV sequence in which she makes short work of a cadre of "PSICOM" soldiers, she teams up with another passenger, the impressively be-afroed Sazh. Suddenly, you're in control.

After choosing one of four base camera angles to experience the demo with, battle begins almost immediately. A more detailed description of FFXIII's re-imagining of the traditional ATB system can be found on the third page of this article, but one's first impression is speed. Everything is command-based, but these real-time battles are even zippier than those of FFX-2. Every command costs chunks of a segmented Time Gauge, which gradually fills as time passes—one for

Ready for the final fight...

LIGHTNING
Voice actor (Japan): Maaya Sakamoto

Full name: Unknown. A woman of dignified severity. Her cool manner and expertise with weapons suggests a military background, though the truth cannot be ascertained—she rarely speaks of herself. Others call her Lightning, but her real name is a mystery.

SNOW

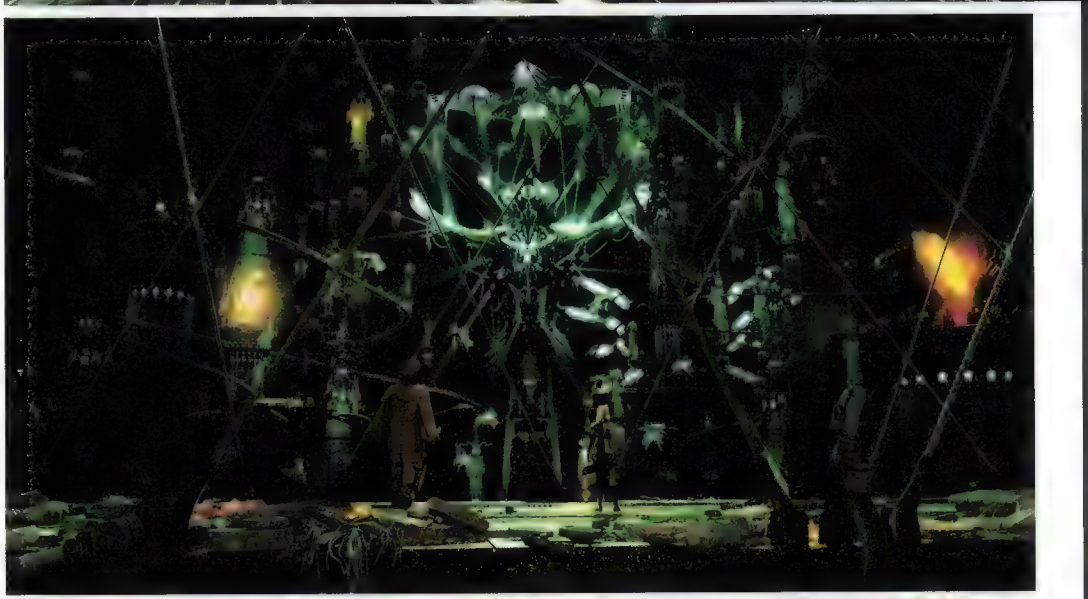
Voice actor (Japan): Daisuke Ono

Full name: Snow Villiers. A hotheaded martial arts practitioner who leads the anti-Theocracy, pro-freedom group "the Strays". With a powerful physical presence and open personality, he strives to liberate Cocoon citizens forced to relocate to Pulse.

"As these screens illustrate, Final Fantasy XIII is already the best-looking, highest-tech console RPG of the generation."

commands like Attack, three for ranged spells like Firaga. You don't have to wait for the gauge to completely fill to issue a command, nor do you have to use all segments you have charged at once. As players will come to see over the course of the surprisingly lengthy demo, the new system is highly strategic, and at first blush seems to offer more challenge than previous FFs. Later on in the demo, the player takes control of Snow and his party of resistance members, "the Strays." Playing as both characters begins to reveal the layers of action game-like depth to the battles—they're so enjoyable, I imagine many fans will play the demo over and over again simply to get better at them.

I don't want to spoil much more about the demo, as it's entirely possible many of our readers will be importing it for themselves. Just know this: As these screens illustrate, Final Fantasy XIII is already the best-looking, highest-tech console RPG of the generation...and a sustained, 50-hour experience of this quality is a very exciting prospect indeed. Square Enix has finally proved FFXIII exists, and it's glorious. Now it comes down to the waiting.



The Battle System

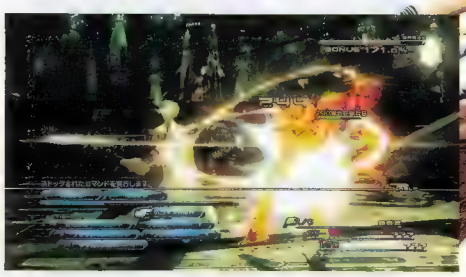
The FFXIII demo's primary attraction is the re-imagining of the classic Active Time Battle system. Although several, as-yet-unrevealed features will be present in the final, the demo gave us a look at the basics. Unlike FFXII, battles are not seamless. Instead, a "symbol encounter" system reminiscent of Chrono Trigger's is employed, in which enemies can be seen—and avoided—on the field. Rest easy, random encounter haters: Transitions in and out of battle are essentially instantaneous. Taking control of the lead character in your three-person party, you issue commands as in any other FF. The difference in XIII is speed—things move at an even faster clip than the ultra-crunchy FFX-2. Commands cost from one to three segments of the Time Gauge, which fills as time passes. Thus up to three attacks can be strung together, resulting in the type of fancy, visually-pleasing combos seen in the initial 2006 FFXIII trailer. Racking up combo "Chains" fills the gauge found in the upper-right of the screen, which, when full, allows you to "Break" enemies, setting them up for the devastating Launch command. After flinging foes into the air, Lightning or Snow can follow up with pyrotechnic Devil May Cry-style air juggles.

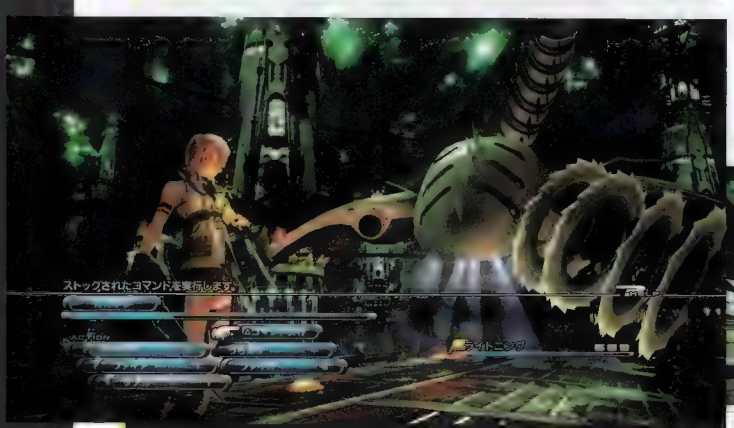
"Taking control of the lead character in your three-person party, you issue commands as in any other FF."

FFXIII uses a "symbol encounter" system, a first for the series. Enemies can be seen on the field and avoided if necessary.

...mad aerial combos! Enemies in "Break" state can be hurtled into the air with the "Launch" command and followed with several mid-air attacks.

Chaining together attacks fills the gauge at the upper right. When full, enemies will "Break", making them susceptible to...





The "Time Gauge" (bottom left) gradually fills, and each command (listed below the gauge) costs a certain amount—from one to three segments.

There doesn't seem to be any MP in FFXIII; instead, magic costs segments of the Time Gauge. Ranged spells like Blizzaga, seen here, cost the most.

VANILLE

Voice actor (Japan): Yukari Fukui

Full name: Oerba Dia Vanille. A seemingly ordinary girl liberated from the Theocracy's forced migration, who even under high pressure appears strangely innocent and calm. She carries inside her a fierce determination, though she may not manifest the trait for some time.

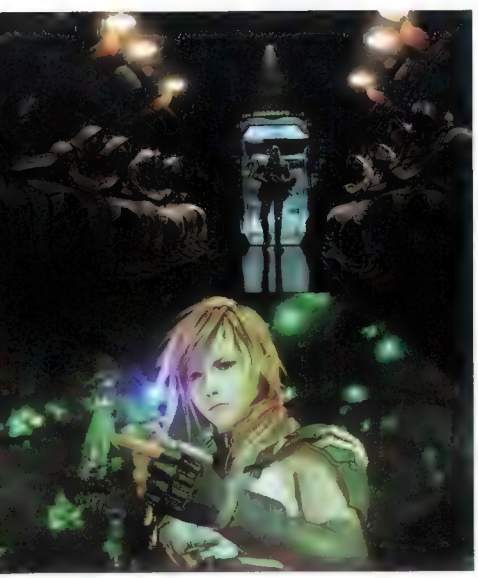
Motomu Toriyama, Director
(FFX, X-2, FFXII Revenant Wings)
Yoshinori Kitase, Producer
(FFVI, VII, VIII, X, X-2, Crisis Core FFVII)
Isamu Kamikokuryo, Art Director
(FFX, FFXII, FFXII Revenant Wings)
Q&A

Thanks for having us here today. Our time is very short, so I'd like to ask questions about FFXIII I haven't seen answered in print before. At the beginning of the demo, we see terrified former residents of the city of Cocoon being "migrated" to the world of Pulse below. Why is the prospect of living on Pulse so frightening to them?
The people who live in Cocoon are taught from birth that Pulse is the equivalent of hell—a dreadful place. They don't actually know what's down there, but they know it's hostile.

How big is Cocoon in comparison to the world below?
Not that this applies to actual playable area, but in terms of setting Cocoon can be compared to the size of the North American continent, and Pulse below it is the size of our own Earth.

The scene with the train when the game first begins—is that Pulse?
That's actually the farthest outskirts of Cocoon. It's so close that Pulse's influence seeps in... relics from Pulse still remain in the frontier areas of Cocoon.

Is that where the monsters you fight in the demo come from?
There are monsters common to both places, but Cocoon also has unique monsters that evolved independently over its long history. There are also species that were diverted for military use by Cocoon's Holy Government, like the "Behemoth Kai" you fight in the demo.



> "As far as porting difficulties [to Xbox 360], of course they exist, but I'd say trying to get the American and European versions out within as short a time span as possible will be harder."

Moving on to characters, after playing the demo I get the sense that Lightning is a rather harsh, cold person. That's unusual for the Final Fantasy series—what was the inspiration for her character?
She has a very stoic character, so that might be the first impression people get. We asked [Tetsuya] Nomura to design a character with the kind of personality that comes from having undergone intense, repeated training, almost like an athlete.

What can you tell us about the creation of Sazh? People seem to have a strong reaction to him.
I think part of what makes him interesting is his age. Many of us game creators have families of our own now, so we wanted to have party characters from a fairly wide age range. We especially wanted a middle-aged, somewhat unheroic fellow who truly loves his family. We came up with Sazh (laughs).

I'm always interested to learn which comes first in an RPG's development—the world, or the characters. Does one inform the other?
The earliest stages do begin with world-building, but once the general flow of the story is decided on, the particulars of the characters are fleshed out and designers start to bring life to them. In the case of XIII, we didn't begin with just one game, but rather the larger frame of Fabula Nova Crystallis. Each separate team—XIII, Versus and Agito—took the base crystal myth and interpreted it their own way.

Tell us about the re-imagining of the famous Active Time Battle system. Will it be ATB all the way this time? No "Wait" mode?
There probably won't be any Wait mode. Battles will always be real time.

One thing I noticed while playing was the lack of any way to escape from battle, or any manual way to block. Are such things gone?
There are a lot of things we can't say about the battles yet, but... in previous FFs, if you got a Game Over in battle you'd be booted all the way back to your last save point. The way that's handled in FFXIII will change... the whole style will change, so a "Run" command might lose its meaning. Also, since you can see enemies on the field you'll be able to avoid them from the start. It's still ATB, but playing will be a little different.

The main feature of the new ATB is the segmented time gauge. How was that concept developed?
We wanted to make ATB more, well, active. Starting with the concept of slicing a single time axis up into small pieces, we eventually arrived at the current system.

The FFXIII playable demo released in Japan on April 16th also has new trailers for Versus and Agito. I think a lot of people wonder if they're connected in any tangible way.
Each team is making their respective game with a lot of freedom in game design and story—it's not like you'll see what becomes of the XIII characters in Versus, or anything. Instead, the connections come from the Fabula Nova Crystallis myth. For instance, the walled city of Cocoon and the outside world of Pulse are related to the base myth. Agito and Versus have that in common, and although Cocoon and Pulse won't appear in those games by name, a similar, but different interpretation of the myth will.

Finally, lots of American fans are curious about the Xbox 360 version. Do you expect any differences in the two versions? Will the porting process be difficult?
As far as the game itself, there won't be any differences. Sure, the hardware is different, so tiny details may change, but gameplay won't be affected at all. The truth is development of the Xbox 360 version hasn't begun in earnest yet, but out goal is an identical product. As far as porting difficulties, of course they exist, but I'd say trying to get the American and European versions out within as short a time span as possible will be harder (laughs).

SAZH
Voice actor (Japan): Masashi Ebara

Full name: Sazh Katzroy. An older man than the other protagonists, he bears a strong, age-appropriate sense of social responsibility. Not without his childlike qualities, Sazh allows a pet chocobo chick to nest inside his impressive coif.

System: Wii | Developer: Sega | Publisher: Sega | Available: TBA

Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games

Racing in a winter wonderland!

words Brady Fiechter

Sonic & Mario at the Olympic Games was a great proposition. Bring Mario and Sonic and their respective clans together, siphon all the wonderful color and charm all these classic characters have offered us over the years into the spirit of the Olympic games, and charge it all up with the excitement of a new Nintendo hardware. Is this not destined for effortless gold?

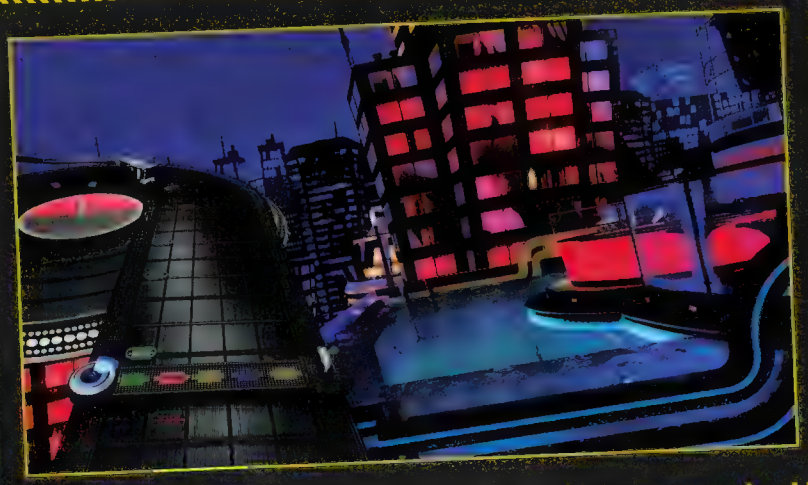
Between the DS and Wii versions, sales of Sonic & Mario at the Olympic Games sold 10 million copies. That, dear reader, is solid gold. But all that financial success did not mean the games delivered to the… hardcore? Discriminating gamer? Gamer who knows what a great game is all about? What is a "great" game anyways? Plenty of people liked it.

Maybe you fell in love with Sonic & Mario at the Olympic games, but I sort of smiled a bit and walked away wanting more. I wanted more visual snap, more variety of play, more substantial game structure. And just three events in, with the promise of plenty more, I'm getting it with the sequel Sonic & Mario at the Olympic Winter Games, taking place in authentic venues in Vancouver and Whistler, Canada.

Beefing up the single-player component to the Sonic & Mario Olympic formula was one of the first things producer Osamu Ohashi addressed as he expressed the teams' intentions for a better all-around experience. There was an open discussion to the idea that the first game was indeed a more likely draw to what was coined a "family" oriented atmosphere; the director of the DS game, Eigo Kasahara, spoke of his intentions to improve the control scheme and offer an adventure mode with quests and minigames. The Wii version will contain a festival mode, culminating in boss battes. A great creator is always wanting more, and it certainly doesn't hurt that Shigeru Miyamoto is being billed as a consultant on the project.

So what does all this amount to? A demonstrably more appealing game right out the gate, which begins with downhill skiing, speed skating, and my favorite, the bobsleigh. Four-player co-op, and co-op in general, is obviously a big addition to the game, showcased in the bobsleigh as four of us, in tandem, held our Wiimotes to our chests and attempted to sway back and forth to guide our racer down the tube while gaining speed bursts when in perfect unison. Reward for more skilled play—say just clipping the flags in the downhill skii for a boost and drift in the snowboarding—hints at an underpinning of strategy.

If you own a Wii balance board, some of the events (which are still under wraps) will allow you to sit or stand for added effect. I'll not admit to my downhill skiing results at this time.



SCRATCH The Ultimate DJ

Hip hop you don't stop

words Heather Anne Campbell

For those of us who like to rock, there are plenty of music/rhythm game options. Whether you want to lead a Band, or be a Hero, you're covered. Indeed, there are very few songs left in the rock world that haven't been claimed by Harmonix or Neversoft.

But let's say you don't dig Aerosmith. The Beatles leave you feeling, "Meh." What then, young DJ? What do you do?

Sure, you can always pick up a copy of Dance Dance Revolution, but hopping on arrows isn't the same as pressing them with your thumbs. Some people want to feel like they're responsible for the music, not just dancing along with it.

For those wannabes, 7 Studios has been developing Scratch: The Ultimate DJ. Scratch has all the familiar music-game stops covered. There's a career mode that follows your progress from garage to club, there's versus modes that pit you against other players online, and there's real-time dancers who respond to your skills.

But Scratch isn't just a hanger-on. Though it's slated to go up against Activision's DJ Hero, the game wasn't born of a me-too attitude. Creative director Dan Lerich was quick to point out the differences: Guitar Hero, or Rock Band, punish the player for jam sessions. Scratch rewards them. Remember the parts of Parappa the Rapper where you could pound on the buttons in time with the music, for some creatively rewarding improvisation? Scratch does a little of that.

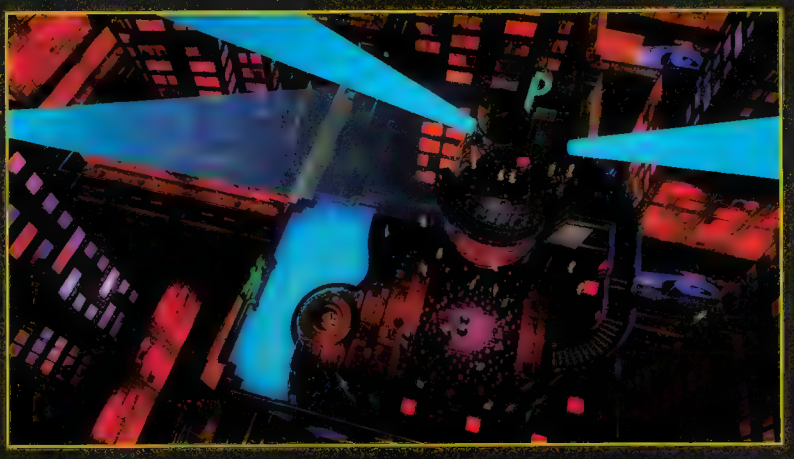
In fact, unlike Band or Hero, The Ultimate DJ lets you record your best sessions...because a great play through is going to sound unique, tailored to your own sensibilities.

Samples come from a variety of pre-existing battle records that come with the software, but can be expanded with a USB microphone. Want to scratch in your own voice? Just record it, and then lay down a layer of samples over the song you're scratching. Think about that for a moment, and try and imagine the other sorts of samples you could mix into the song.

> "With music by artists like Kanye West, Run DMC, and The Gorillaz..."

Speaking of mixing, the controller is being produced in conjunction with Numark, a well-known DJ kit manufacturer. The music-game staple, a familiar set of colored buttons, is augmented by a large turntable that can be manipulated in real-time. Scratching the table doesn't just load up a pre-existing set of scratch samples; instead, the feedback is actually based on the action of the record.

With music by artists like Kanye West, Run DMC, and The Gorillaz, there's sure to be a large variety of major bands behind the game. Beastie Boys? Yep. Portishead? Well...we can dream, can't we?



System: PS3 | Developer: Idea Factory | Publisher: NIS America | Available: May

Cross Edge
クロスエッジ

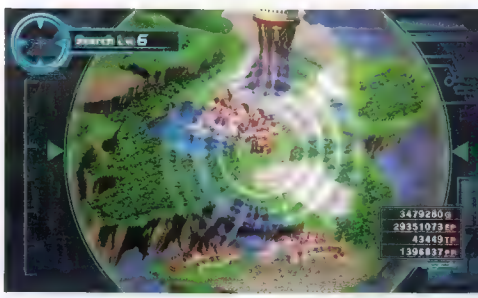
Multiple personalities in order

words Dave Halverson

People who know these characters and how cautious their publishers are about how and where they're used are probably pinching themselves right about now, because things like this just don't happen. Take it from somebody who's surrounded by 12-18 inch-tall polystone, resin, and PVC women: Cross Edge is the coolest thing to happen to niche RPGs since the niche RPG. It's also one of the most original turn-based RPGs to come along in years, as there's not a single traditional thing about it. But first things first.

Yes indeed, it's a bona-fide certified PS3 exclusive and it looks it. Not that it's a picture of cutting-edge technology; but Cross Edge has extra punch where fans of the genre expect it—the character overlays and backgrounds are super sharp, the sprites wonderfully animated, the monster models are far more sophisticated than usual, the pyrotechnics glisten, and there are many hours of spoken dialogue. Cross Edge features 16 characters from seven separate games along with original characters York, Miko, and May. York and Miko arrive first and switch roles in the North American version with York taking over as the lead. Joining them are: Aurica, Misha, Lyner and Shurelia from Ar Tonelico: Melody of Eternia; Raze, Lily, and Whim, from Mana-Khemia 2: The Fall of Alchemy; Dimitri, Felicia, Morrigan, Lilith, and Jedah from Darkstalkers; Etna and Prinny from Disgaea; Marie from Atelier Marie; and Meu and Zelos from Spectral Souls.

The game begins with Miko and York, neither of whom have any idea where they are or why, which matters not when a pair of nasty green wolf-like creatures want to nibble on their chattering carcasses. Up to this point everything happens via super hi-def hand drawn overlays hovering over the background where they appear as super deformed (squashed, cute) versions of themselves. Don't worry so much about the battle-system at this point. You're going to get a lot of information that won't really apply until you've made some progress in the game. The important thing is



Search without leaving the

"Cross Edge has extra punch where fans of the genre expect it..."

grasping the overall newness of the Action Battle System, assigning skills to buttons, the action count (a timer that starts winding down when you use a skill that rewards you for the number of attacks you can launch before it hits zero) and branch combos…fun, fun Branch combos. Whichever character is active shows in the upper-right hand character window (cycled with L1/R1) along with their skills. Once you launch a skill the trick is to switch to another character at just the right moment to continue the attack and form a branch combo. Break Arts and Extra Combos require similar timing skills. The basic premise behind the system is combining grid-based strategic placement, depending on a particular characters range, with precision timing. It's timing tactical, and turn-based! The overhead map is unique too. Events aren't readily displayed but rather found by scanning the area to find any souls or events in the immediate vicinity. Scanning from a save point covers a wider as your search level increases without the risk of running into monsters. Save points are also where you'll find the customization, Item, and Medical rooms (and Morrigan the nurse; oooh I feel sick…). I could go on for days talking about the rest of Cross Blade's multitude of menus and management; it's crazy deep—there are even some 2D action sections!—but if you've read this far, you know the drill, and you want the game.

System: 360,PS3, PC | **Developer:** Techland | **Publisher:** Ubisoft | **Available:** Summer

Call of Juarez

Bound in Blood

Into the Wild...

Brady Fiechter

So get this. Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood doesn't posses any space marines or marines or men in uniform who are basically marines. It's not even gritty. Well, maybe a little gritty; more grimy, dusty, dirty. It's chasing after the enchanting soul of the wild west during the Civil War.

Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood is not dependent on your typical first-person theme, and that's one of its greatest strengths, evident even before my hands are allowed to touch the controller. A few minutes of controlled gameplay demoing has landed this outlaw shooter on my most wanted list for 2009.

Setting is essential in Call of Juarez. As the game goes through its introduction, developer Techland quickly calls attention to the importance of their game's spirited world that traces two hard-nosed cowboys through southern Arizona, Georgia, Mexico and the open desert wonder that unites them. Stagecoaches, steamboats, mining settlements and the abandonment of a ghost town. It's everything poignant that surrounded the Civil War times in a land that's anything but civil.

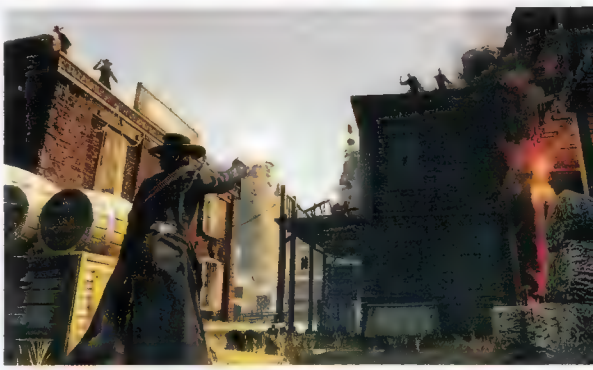
This prequel to the underappreciated Call of Juarez follows the brothers Thomas and Ray, out for their own personal brand of justice, spearheaded by shotguns, six shooters, rusty rifles, and honor. Thomas is the friendlier one, agile and smarter, relying on his lasso and the ability to quietly assess a situation for survival. But without Ray, the dynamite-carrying aggressor, the pair are dead meat. The game will follow both brothers in a co-op scenario, where decisions are weighed based on the strengths and weakness of the two in harmonious action.

> "The painterly beauty of a stark desert setting is captivating. This is a dusty, dirty, antique world..."

The game relies on more realistic combat, dropping targets with single-shot kills that pierce the vulnerable, armor-free flesh of the enemy. With a consistent string of deadly accurate shots, racked up kills can cook up the skull on a concentration meter that will bring you into slow-motion scenarios that unleash a flurry of bullets overt multiple targets in one pop. The cock of the gun and stylistic placement within the frame is a cool touch that further emphasizes this early game's subtle artistic flair.

The painterly beauty of a stark desert setting is captivating. This is a dusty, dirty, antique world, but the color of the patterned wallpaper, lovely lighting from torches and lamps, and the ornate touches on the interiors and clothing is wonderfully envisioned. In my enthusiasm to tout the game's visual appeal to my colleague Mike Griffin, he responded knowingly: "Great stuff. It's probably right up there with the best technology this generation. I really like the lighting/post-processing in their engine, a special blended system. Something they claim nobody else is doing. It's really effective for settings like the dusty wild west or sun-baked beaches in Dead Island. And they're pretty f-ing great with the normal/parallax map stuff; the textures really have nice depth and definition."

If you're worried that there won't be enough spectacle and explosion in Bound for Blood, it would seem Techland is upping the ante this time out. In one scene, a tiny war unfolds as you rush a Native American camp, teepees blowing up, cowboys and Indians scattering and yelling and creating the kind of destruction you'd expect in a war, no matter what the era. Good stuff indeed, but it's that setting that gets me.



SNK Special

The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match

The King is alive and well

words Eric L. Patterson

By nature of its name, I'm sure that even the non-SNK fans out there can probably make the stunning assumption that The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match has something to do with a game released in the year 1998. That assumption would indeed be correct.

In the ten years since the fifth official chapter of SNK's all-star fighting franchise first hit arcades around the globe, SNK has released countless other competitive brawlers in both this series and many others. (Seriously, try counting the exact number of titles, I dare you.) And yet, all of these years later, The King of Fighters '98 stands to this day as one of the greatest, deepest, and more enjoyable fighters the folks in Osaka have ever produced. 1998 was not just the year in which the KOF series had its first "dream match" release, where storylines were put aside to better make a game that was about fanservice over fiction; it was also the year in which the elements that had begun in 1994 truly came together to cement SNK's place as one of the top dogs of the versus fighting genre.

NeoGeo Freaks and fighting game enthusiasts alike still swear by KOF'98, and in honor of the game's 10th anniversary, SNK Playmore put together Ultimate Match, an attempt to go back and make the game even better.

The first thing you'll notice is the presentation, where a new user interface style is wrapped around reworked stage backgrounds (which can be switched back to their "classic" selves) and remixed audio tracks (ditto). Dig deeper into Ultimate Match, and you'll find the return of the remaining pre-'98 characters that weren't selectable before, additional changes to game balancing, a few new moves, and the ability to mix and match your favorite offensive and defense options from the core play styles via a third "Ultimate" selection.

Then toss in extra options like a surprisingly deep character color palette editor, and the full original arcade version of KOF'98 included as a nice bonus, and this is, true to its name, an "ultimate" version of one of SNK's timeless classics.

KOF fans already own this game; that's all there is to it. So, to the rest of you, let me say this: if you enjoy fighting games to any degree, The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match belongs in your collection. Time has done nothing to tarnish the brilliance of what SNK gave to us those many years ago, and with the new extra layer of polish it has been given, KOF'98 has never shined as bright as it does now.

"...The King of Fighters '98 stands to this day as one of the greatest, deepest, and more enjoyable fighters..."

King proves to Mary why she's the King (of Fighters).

parting shot

I can only think of one thing better than KOF'98 UM: the day KOF'98 UM finally hits XBLA and I can play it online.

Samurai Shodown Anthology

A Tale of Spirits and Swords

words Eric L. Patterson

Collections like Samurai Shodown Anthology are always a tricky subject so far as I'm concerned. Emulation of older games can really be tough to pull off perfectly, and even spending a lot of time with one of the many titles a particular collection offers up, you can easily miss those little details that somebody somewhere else may notice.

What I can tell you is that, with SSA, there's little cause for concern. All six of the games presented here feel, for lack of a better term, "right." It's hard for me to call them perfect emulations, simply for the fact that that's a rather large statement to make. What's important is, never once did I feel like any of the Samurai Shodown chapters weren't running the way they should be, and that's especially thankful when you're talking an anthology of fighting games.

So, instead, the bigger question would probably be if a PS2 anthology full of SamSho titles is worth purchasing in the first place. I bought my NeoGeo AES copy of Samurai Shodown II for around $50 or so back in 1995, and Samurai Shodown IV for $300 the following year. (I'd feel much better about myself if those prices were reversed.)

With SSA, you are getting all six of the major SamSho chapters for a measly $15. Is it worth buying? Absolutely; but it's also the price that makes this collection justifiable.

Simply put, after the series had its stunning start with the original Samurai Shodown, and then gave SNK one of their most beloved NeoGeo hits with SSII, the series kind of failed to live up to its potential. SSIII felt almost like a reboot of the franchise, with completely redrawn sprites, a number of gameplay features stripped out, and an odd sense of moving closer to a more Capcom style of gameplay. SSIV beefed the game back up, but continued the series along the track of being less the slower-paced strategy fighter it used to be, and more the faster-paced flash and pizzazz it had become. SSV came as SNK resurrected themselves in 2001, and having been developed by Yuki Enterprise instead of SNK proper, almost all of the old-school SamSho feeling that had still existed was now gone. (We were also introduced in part five to Mina, the archery-based character who is so cheap she should get a job as an SNK end boss.) Finally, in 2005, SNK brought the series back home with SSVI, a game that feels so different and foreign compared to where things started, yet which has a lot to offer if you go into it with an open mind.

As I see it, $15 is a respectable price to pay for a couple truly top-tier Samurai Shodown titles that come packed together with a few more average to not-too-shabby ones. Collectors will be glad to know that one disc will provide them with versions of the games worth owning; more casual fans just wanting a little versus Samurai action might instead make their first priority the online-playable XBLA version of SSII.

parting shot

Samurai Shodown is a series that isn't always excellent, but is certainly worth playing. For less than a Jackson, you get a nearly-complete collection of the 2D SamSho saga that will either be a fine addition to your library of PS2 SNK anthologies, or will finally allow you to go back and try the chapters you missed the first time around.

"All six of the games presented here feel, for lack of a better term, 'right.'"

Galford shows his terrible way with women.

Update

The King of Fighters XII

The new king of HD?

words Eric L. Patterson

As we in the United States just received the PS2 version of The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match, the world sits on the eve of the arcade release of the latest chapter of the series, The King of Fighters XII.

Just in case you need catching up, KOFXII is a true rebirth for the franchise, as backgrounds and the characters themselves have been completely redrawn in 720p resolution to embrace the current push for entertainment to move into the world of high definition.

Twenty characters will be present for the arcade release of the game (which should have hit in Japan by the time you read this), but an additional selection of console-exclusive roster members has been promised. ('98-era Mai–you know you want to SNK.) The home version will also sport a few additional features, one of which will be a sprite-smoothing option for those who might not appreciate the trademark SNK "pixel" look that's still a part of the game's transition into HD.

Best part is, we don't have much longer to wait; Ignition Entertainment is bringing KOFXII to the States on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 this July.

www.playstationzone.com

System: Wii | Developer: Nintendo Tokyo | Publisher: Nintendo | Available: May 4

Donkey Kong Jungle Beat

You just can't beat it

words Dave Halverson

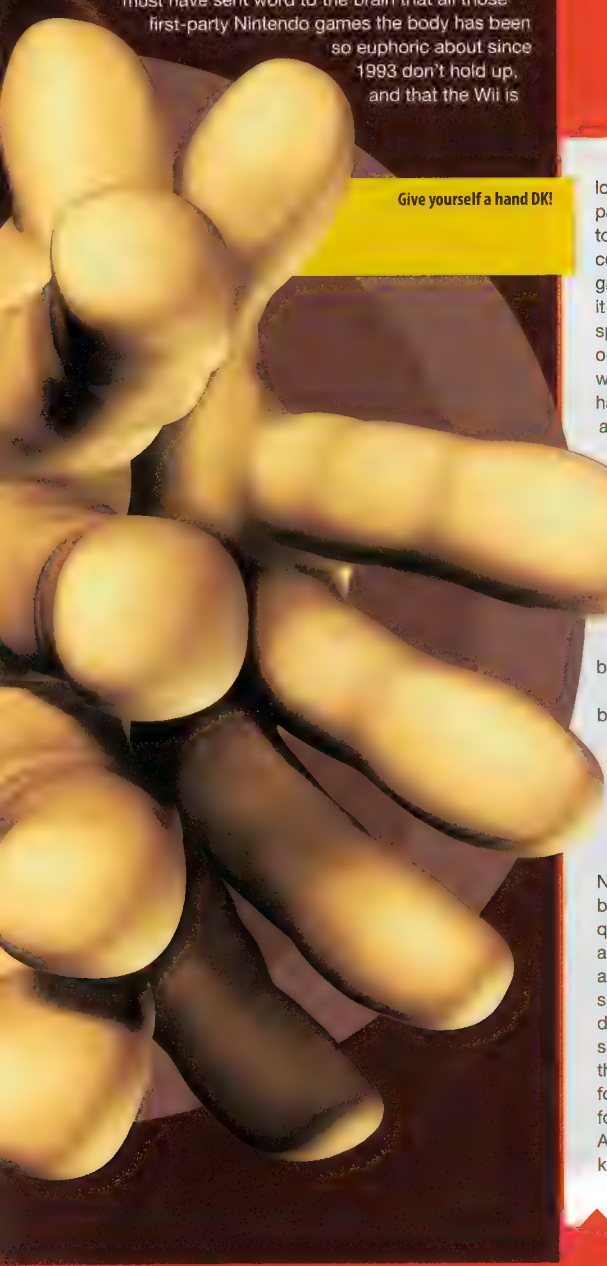
Something definitely snapped in me when Miyamoto suggested we spend some time apart; maybe start seeing other games. After all we'd been through together how could he say that? How could he throw it all away for some pie in the sky "casual" gamer? Especially after the amazing time we had on our trip through Super Mario Galaxy. But you know what? I think the Moto man may have saved us both. God that man is brilliant!.

I've learned a lot during our time apart. For starters, there's a good chance that my inner graphics whore is dead, or at least mortally wounded. I'm no less floored when I see a shimmering beacon of 7th generation technology these days, although my definition of shimmering 7th generation technology has definitely changed. I quibble about the Wii's technical shortcomings on a regular basis, but in the process I've become its biggest advocate. Month after month the Wii delivers more of the games I love versus the other guys, who seem to be delivering less and less. When it comes to exciting new original games, the Wii has become my console of choice, knowing full well that the days of first-party Nintendo magic were over. Or so I thought. I was under the impression that Nintendo broke up with us hardcore gamers, but the way Miyamoto's been speaking lately it seems like we're back in his good graces. Imagine adding a couple Super Mario Galaxy-

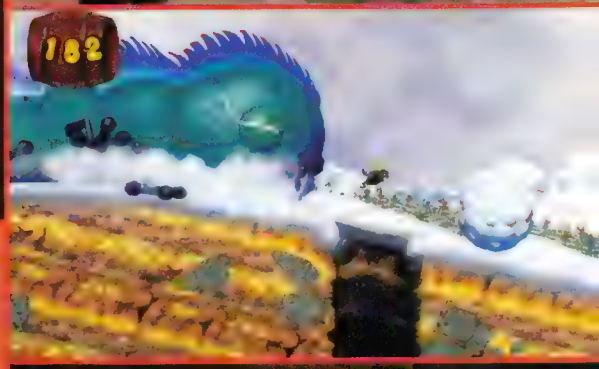
caliber games to your Wii stack every year, or even a few Miyamoto-produced original side-scrollers for Wii Channel…Playing Donkey Kong Jungle Beat makes me think about that a lot.

I wanted so badly to like this game when it was tethered to bongos but ultimately the mental anguish of having a brand-new 2D DK on GameCube but not being able to enjoy it forced me to pretend it never existed. I wasn't all that excited about trading up to air drumming either but I am the Wii guy…

"Okay, whoa, hey now…DK is moving with the analog?"… "Holy shiz, DK is moving with the analog!" I was yelling, probably pretty loud. There was no one left at the office but I don't think I stopped until Ninja Kong (damn dirty ape) reminded me it was almost quittin' time, which didn't matter since I'd be playing it again, and again, and then some more anyway. Donkey Kong Jungle Beat is nothing like you remember; if you remember it at all. Otherwise it's just a new side scrolling Donkey Kong for the Wii. I repeat—it's a new side scrolling Donkey Kong for the Wii. Within the first few joyous moments playing the liberated JB I realized that I've probably been in some form of denial. Unable to cope with the possibility that first-party Nintendo games like this were very likely a thing of the past, the commander of my internal defense mechanism must have sent word to the brain that all those first-party Nintendo games the body has been so euphoric about since 1993 don't hold up, and that the Wii is low-tech so, best move on. Because returning to first-party Nintendo side-scrolling feels way too good. Looks too good too; my Wii looks like the most powerful console in the house when JB's in it. DK himself looks great, and is so perfectly married to the environment it feels like you're controlling a tiny gorilla in a tangible space…it's Nintendo magic. The way his feet patter on the ground and how dynamic he is to everything is wonderful. The creatures all have fuzzy Fox McCloud hair (circa Star Fox Adventures) and every piece of the architecture sparkles whether it's shiny or opaque.



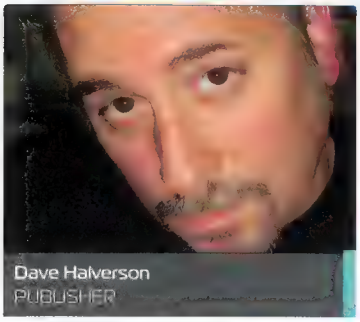
Give yourself a hand DK!



"I repeat—it's a new side-scrolling Donkey Kong for Wii."

The colors are either perfectly subdued or leaping off the screen, and the water, gel effects and weather effects all look appropriately this gen. The levels are divided into D, K, J, and B barrels with 3 Fruit Kingdoms in each and a boss…so, banana, orange, watermelon, apple, strawberry, pineapple, lemon, grape, cherry, peach, melon, and durian add up to a respectable 36 lands and bosses or final encounters.

Jungle Beat in its new form is the kind of game beginners can get through (save for maybe Ninja Kong), but pros can dissect like a fine instrument. To get the most out of Jungle Beat, great timing and reflexes are your best ally. If you want to earn a Crest in each level Kingdom (and you do), the name of the game is air-time. DK jumps with "A," and while he's in the air claps by either flicking the Remote or Nunchuk. Clap an enemy once to stun and again to boot off screen, then hammer "A" and DK's lightning-quick arms will snatch the burst of bananas out of the air for a multiplier. Grab everything you can out of the air. Dotted vertically throughout most worlds (JB's levels span far and wise) are bushes where monkeys hang down to grab and shoot you through the air. Jump, then shake, and away you go. While you're zipping through the air, besides picking off any bananas, clapping pixies forms a flower trail which loads your special gauge (so follow it) and staying airborne racks up crazy multipliers. As long as you don't hit the ground or repeat moves it keeps on going until you land. There are vines to swing and bounce on, mushrooms that grow into launch pads, flower stems you can spin up and launch from…and on and on. Anywhere you see sparkles a clap will produce a big bouncy gel pad, and anywhere you see sprites you get some psychedelic flower action. DK handles bigger baddies by clapping once to stun (many of which conceal their weak spot) and then again to grab on and pummel via air drumming. Dealing with enemies and obstacles from above, once you jump hold the analog stick in the direction you need to clap and flick the remote...this gets tricky. Hitching a ride on a Helibird is another great play mechanic. Once you clap and grab a leg, pressing "A" flaps the wings and you steer with the analog; touch anything and you fall. Nintendo has always had fun with this trick and they go for broke here, between moving DK through passages and while avoiding other birds and such. Clapping a bubble plant is even cooler. Instead of pressing a button, you steer the bubble by gently turning the Remote clockwise and counter clockwise while avoiding enemies and working the physics against any fans that blow you away. There are some wicked butt-sliding levels, more unforgettable DK underwater worlds, and a big black boar named Hoofer that will give you the ride of your life. Expect great boss battles too, from super-fun punching matches, to screen-filling behemoths that contain some of the best pattern-based exchanges I've had in years incorporating the shake grab and hurl move and, well, you'll find out soon enough. I've barely nicked the surface of the amazing gameplay on hand, and besides, this is one of those amazing action games you just have to see and feel to appreciate.



Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: I think it's time publishers started listening more to their customers and less to the number crunchers. The vast majority of gamers we're talking to prefer single-player games where the money goes into the core game, and nowhere else. There are plenty of games out there designed for multi-player, so why do publishers feel compelled to cram unwanted multi-player and co-op into genres that clearly don't benefit from it? Looking at the latest NPD numbers, consumers aren't taking the bait so why beat a dead horse? When a game like de Blob—a pure as the driven goop original single-player action game with no artificial ingredients—can move 250k+ copies, and a hand-drawn 2D Wario is outselling the likes of a "broad" user behemoth like Banjo Kazooie N&B I think the people have spoken. **Brain Drain:** Playing Brutal Legend was too cool. Had to write it on no sleep though. Argh. **Game of the Month:** Phantasy Star Portable

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

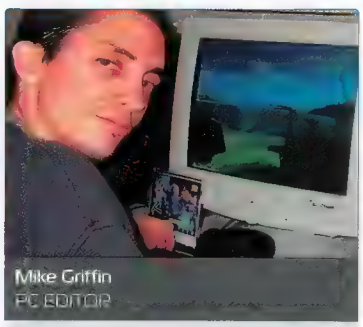
Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: It's not that the idea of Flower wasn't of interest—serene, pretty, abstract and made by a small team of designers. It's just one of those things; I just never got around to properly giving it my time. Now that I have enjoyed it to completion, a question lingers: why wasn't there more of a fuss surrounding Flower? What a wonderful game.
Game of the Month: Chronicles of Riddick

Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: When you think about it, $350 million in government monies to bail out Greg Orlando isn't such a bad deal after all.

Game of the Month: Resident Evil 5



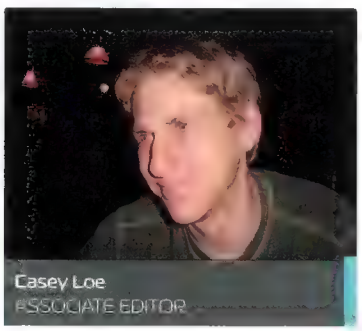
Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...
Brain Drain: April 21st Eidos shares will be delisted and a day later the venerable UK publisher becomes a wholly-owned subsidiary of Square Enix. Wow. I wonder if SE will preserve the identity that Eidos has forged through the years? One of franchise whoring and gross inconsistency, but also a legacy of beloved Tomb Raider, Thief, Soul Reaver, Hitman and Deus Ex titles. Outstanding franchises for a big Western push...

Game of the Month: The Path

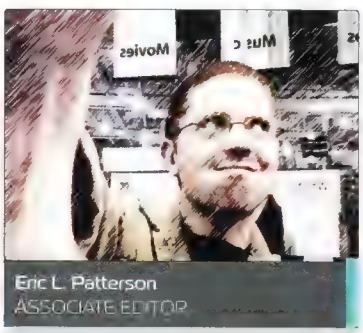
Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Since when did GDC become a platform for debuting game trailers? In the past, developers at least had the good taste to couch them in a technical conference, like Little Big Planet's debut in 07. This year's was a media circus, less concerned with the latest parallax occlusion mapping techniques, and moreso with blockbuster announcements. Oh well, there's always DICE.
Game of the Month: Demon's Souls



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

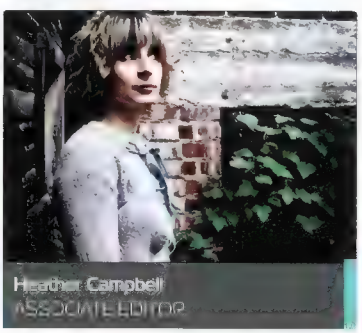
Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.
Brain Drain: The Modern Warfare 2 teaser revealed absolutely nothing about the game, but there was one thing that caught my eye—an exact November 10th release date, revealed 7 1/2 months in advance. I like the idea of announcing release dates far in advance, as movie companies do, since it gives competitors fair warning to get out of the way. Instead of treating release dates as trade secrets, higher levels of transparency could be a win for everyone.
Game of the Month: Ninja Blade, to my surprise



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked. **Brain Drain:** I'm kind of fed up with software as of late. Either it doesn't do what I want it to do, doesn't work right, is ungodly slow, or is all three. I hate having great ideas for software but no skill at programming. Anybody out there want to help me make some spiffy Mac OS X apps, especially a new email client? epatterson@playmagazine.com - mail me. I'm serious.

Game of the Month: KOF'98 UM



Heather Campbell
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: I need a major announcement at E3. I feel like an addict that's slowly losing my high; there hasn't been anything really extraordinary in the world of gaming for a year or so now. I'd love a touch-screen PSP with a built in accelerometer, or an HD Wii, or a glimpse at Final Fantasy Online's sequel. Barring any of these, I'd be happy to see team ICO's game. C'mon. Please?

Game of the Month: Mad World

NINJA BLADE

The secret ninja lovechild of Kratos and Sonic the Hedgehog

words Casey Loe

If you can't enjoy Ninja Blade, then it's time to get out of gaming. I'm not saying it's a great game, or even necessarily one that's worth buying. But when you're leaping around a 747 in mid-air, knocking exploding mutants off the wings, and then battling the 20-ton hydra that's wrapped around the cabin before manually engaging the landing gear for a crash-landing in which you hurl your body against the wheels to stop the skidding airliner from plowing into a buxom television reporter...well, how can you not be having fun? It's probably a cliché to call Ninja Blade a "thrill ride," but I can guarantee that the developers at From Software threw the word around like confetti during their pitch meeting. It's a goal they've achieved with aplomb.

Early speculation and some unfortunate marketing choices lead many people to assume that Ninja Blade was some sort of Ninja Gaiden knock-off, but of all the recently released character action games, that may be the one it resembles least. While Ninja Gaiden brought fighting-game levels of depth to the genre, Ninja Blade is a shallower game that leaps from game mode to game mode in hopes that you won't have time to notice that none of them are particularly great. Surprisingly, it works. The game's relentless pace will grab you tight and won't give you a moment's peace until it's time to tally the mission results.

If you dissect Ninja Blade under a surgical lamp, you won't find the pieces of a particularly great game. The combat system is fun and filled with cool-looking and easily executed moves, but the enemy AI is of the meandering, non-aggressive variety that would send a disdainful tear rolling down Ninja Gaiden designer Tomonobu Itagaki's pockmarked face. The boss battles—of which there are dozens—are quite a bit more interesting, with several avenues to victory and surprisingly little repetition. The platforming parts are lousy, with simple stage layouts that are only made difficult by unnecessarily floaty controls. The frantic run-away-quickly and run-down-the-side-of-a-building scenes are short and generally pointless, and the lengthy gun-turret shooting scenes aren't anything that you haven't played a thousand times before. The QTE bits that serve as the transition from one mode to another are something I thought I'd hate, but they're as inoffensive as QTE's can be; if you miss a timed button press, the game merely rewinds a few seconds so you can try again. I typically hate QTE's, but they serve a purpose in Ninja Blade, keeping players engaged during what would otherwise be passive event scenes that drain the tempo from the game.

A typical Ninja Blade mission transitions from one style of play to another ten to twenty times over the course of each roughly hour-long mission. Each segment flows logically to the next, building to a crescendo of boss fights and awesome QTE scenes in which you finish off your target in ludicrous and imaginative ways. The story is ridiculous, nonsensical, and hammily acted, but do you really want a David Mamet screenplay in a game where a ninja surfs on a guided missile to direct it back at the helicopter that fired it? Ninja Blade's event scenes are glorious stupidity of the best possible kind, and the only way they could be more fun is if the lead roles were voiced by Patrick Swayze and Keanu Reeves.

Ninja Blade's graphics are nice; there's a bit of screen tearing but the over-top bosses (Slime Helicopter!) are totally worth it. The QTE cut scenes are extremely well directed, and add a nice visceral punch to the action. There are plenty of hidden items and power-ups to find on your roughly 8-10 hour quest, and your achievements will earn you a wide variety of in-game costumes that you can use to make hero Ken look even more badass, or transform him into some sort of ridiculous harlequin ninja. That helps a bit, but Ninja Blade still doesn't have much in the way of replay value. Unless you're really into beating leaderboard times, Ninja Blade is the sort of game you'll plow through once and then sell back to GameStop; there are no deep skill trees or advanced tactics to master a second time around. But don't be surprised if you end up buying it back one day; Ninja Blade is no masterpiece, but it's the sort of campy classic that'll be a blast to revisit with a few friends and a twelve-pack.

"It's probably a cliché to call Ninja Blade a 'thrill ride,' but I can guarantee that the developers at From Software threw the word around like confetti during their pitch meeting. It's a goal they've achieved with aplomb."

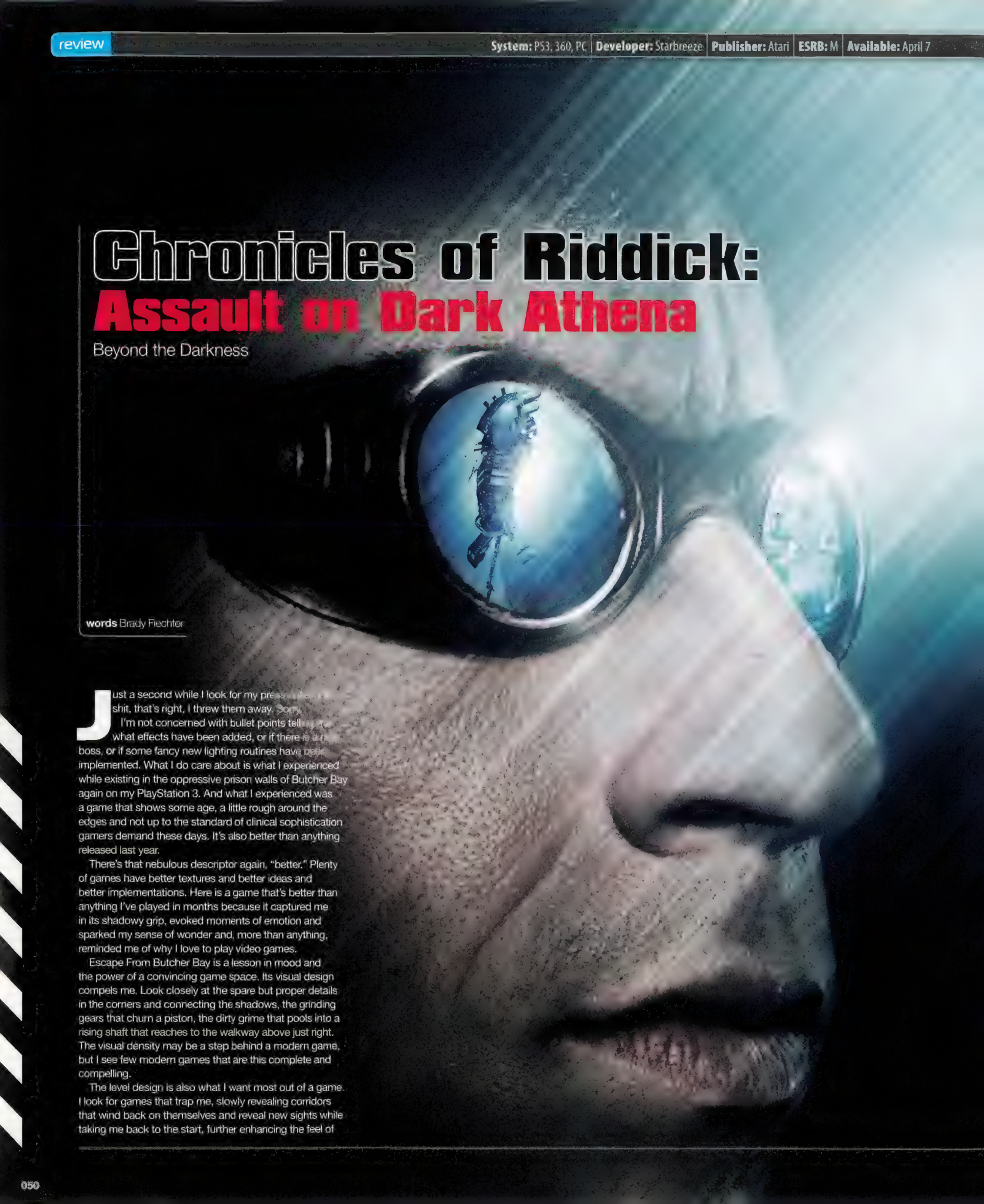
parting shot

It may not keep you busy for long, but Ninja Blade is a goofy, thrilling roller-coaster ride of a game that's hard not to enjoy.

System: PS3, 360, PC | Developer: Starbreeze | Publisher: Atari | ESRB: M | Available: April 7

Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena

Beyond the Darkness



words Brady Fiechter

Just a second while I look for my pre[illegible] shit, that's right, I threw them away. Sorry. I'm not concerned with bullet points telling me what effects have been added, or if there is a new boss, or if some fancy new lighting routines have been implemented. What I do care about is what I experienced while existing in the oppressive prison walls of Butcher Bay again on my PlayStation 3. And what I experienced was a game that shows some age, a little rough around the edges and not up to the standard of clinical sophistication gamers demand these days. It's also better than anything released last year.

There's that nebulous descriptor again, "better." Plenty of games have better textures and better ideas and better implementations. Here is a game that's better than anything I've played in months because it captured me in its shadowy grip, evoked moments of emotion and sparked my sense of wonder and, more than anything, reminded me of why I love to play video games.

Escape From Butcher Bay is a lesson in mood and the power of a convincing game space. Its visual design compels me. Look closely at the spare but proper details in the corners and connecting the shadows, the grinding gears that churn a piston, the dirty grime that pools into a rising shaft that reaches to the walkway above just right. The visual density may be a step behind a modern game, but I see few modern games that are this complete and compelling.

The level design is also what I want most out of a game. I look for games that trap me, slowly revealing corridors that wind back on themselves and reveal new sights while taking me back to the start, further enhancing the feel of

belonging to a real space; add to that tons of platforming, bringing tactile texture to the senses. There is a lingering sense of fear here, a slight touch of dread and coldness, an intimacy in the darkness that is inviting and intoxicating.

The game asks me to use my imagination and look away from its blunders, and I'm able to when I need to for greater effect, and I can put aside the artifice, like the strained mission structure, and the jarring loading screens, and the mechanical construct of some of the stealth aspects. As in The Darkness before it, Starbreeze does some things remarkably well, and is awkward in ways that deserve the criticism received. But the group is a creative force that nails so much of what I want, and I am grateful for their vision.

Escape From Butcher Bay empowers you with moments more about the idea of cinematic beats than traditional gameplay rules. I love getting into a mech-like suit and blasting away, not needing to care much about technique, enjoying the empowering rise in action when the past hour was mostly slinking through the shadows and firing off a stun gun. The game flows cool, confident and potent, like the blood of its protagonist.

The sequel to Escape from Butcher Bay, The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, also offers you a stun gun, which I used more than any weapon in the now-much larger and more powerful arsenal. The game offers you many ways to kill, and is more about using weapons than in Butcher Bay—part of what makes it a less effective experience. Spectacle has taken over. The modern, extraneous way of gamemaking—more cutscenes, more talk, more hysteria, more of everything—distracts, losing focus on the adventurous path defined with tighter assurance in Butcher Bay. There are things to love in Dark Athena, and if I hadn't jumped into its fundamentally similar but dramatically expanded world right after Butcher Bay, I would not be so acutely aware of what turned me off.

One area the game kicks ass is in its brutal action. Early on you acquire a weapon called the ulak, a set of discreet half-moon blades that charge the adrenaline as you effectively combo your way into a kill that, with a timely counter or proper strike, ends in a rage. Every game overuses its mechanics, but I never tired of hitting the sweet spot with this weapon. "Nobody wants to die," grumbles the gravely Riddick, "but everybody gets to."

Borrowed from the Riddick films but embellished with Starbreeze's creative touch, drones are a neat enemy in Dark Athena and provide one of the more interesting mechanics. When you take one of these slow moving automatons out, you can use them as cover and fire off their weapon, but their heavy weight keeps you basically stationary, turning shooting sequences into quick hit and runs and establishing little puzzles where, say, you drag a body down a vent and use the gun to blow out a window.

Ambitions sometimes get lost in muddled execution—see The Darkness—but this is a package that will be a marvel to the ones who desire its reach.

parting shot

Never mind that Dark Athena doesn't quite stand up to Butcher Bay. Why should it? As a package, this is an easy sell for someone looking for a moody experience of stealth, action and adventure. Nice to see a game that understands dialogue too.

System: Wii | Developer: Namco Bandai Games | Publisher: [illegible] | Available: [illegible]

Klonoa

Live the Dream

words Dave Halverson

Bringing back a game like Klonoa at this point in time is an interesting choice. The burning question, I think, over whether it succeeds or not lies in exactly who heeds the call. As someone who came up during the time when Klonoa was considered cutting edge, I have fond memories of playing both Door to Phantomile and Klonoa 2: Lunatea's Veil, however, having completed that leg of my gaming journey I've moved on to newer things. I still love a good 5-10 hour-long twitch platformer, but gravitate more towards the ill-behaved antics of a Wario Land Shake-It or more mature-themed games like Little Big Planet. Then again, if Sega was to remake Clockwork Knight, or Astal, or Treasure remade Mischief Makers, I'd walk a mile over hot coals to get my hands on it. So I suppose that's the answer, or at least a good chunk of it. This is a game made for the Klonoa faithful. So grab your Pac-Man hats and head into the ultimate realization of Klonoa's debut performance.

Klonoa for the Wii is a gorgeous remake that die-hard fans should not miss. The 8 Visions, including the "Extra" Great Gale Gambit (good luck by the way), are beautifully retouched (and mirrored for your right-to-left pleasure) and the new bonus stages (fall-to-your-death brutally hard bonus stages that is) contain all the jump-boost-and-capture challenge you could possible ever need. The new motion controls (including a new Whirlwind attack) along with the ability to play with or without the Nunchuck are nice touches too, and the unlockable outfits are a nice incentive to stick it out within the game's tougher chambers. Breadth should be your least concern.

For Klonoa to truly soar though, I think it needs to find a new audience too, and that audience would have to be kids. It's too bad there's

"Klonoa for the Wii is a gorgeous remake that die-hard fans should not miss."

Q&A

Klonoa creator Hideo Yoshizawa

Play: What lead you to the Wii for Klonoa's return?
Hideo Yoshizawa: Although Klonoa is highly supported by hardcore gamers, I have always envisioned Klonoa to be enjoyed by hardcore gamers as well as casual gamers. In that regard I believe the Wii is the perfect system for Klonoa. Actually, when we announced Klonoa for Wii, we started to receive fan letters including "Klonoa was the first game I bought," and "Klonoa got me into video games." I hope that with this new Klonoa release many more people will discover games for the first time.

Have you considered a full-fledged sequel?
There are no currently no plans to create a brand new sequel, although I would really enjoy working on another one.

There was talk of redesigning Klonoa himself. What was the reaction like?
When we were discussing the idea of bringing Klonoa to Wii, we did have an opportunity to develop a completely new character design for a new generation of gamers. However, when the news of this redesign was covered in the media we were inundated with comments from fans telling us to keep Klonoa the same. This show of support convinced us to keep the old Klonoa design. To tell you the truth, I was a little relieved as those comments unexpectedly showed us how much fans care for Klonoa. I am eternally grateful for all the fans who continue to support Klonoa.

The new Phantomile looks great. Did you re-texture the existing framework or rebuild everything from the ground up?
We used the map data of the PlayStation version as a base but we made all new textures and added more detail that was not possible with the PlayStation including lights and shadow as well as water transparency. We also improved the shape of the map itself. In all, this new version is much closer to what we initially imagined with Klonoa: Door to Phantomile.

What are you adding doing to prolong the gameplay?
We have added a new reverse mode that is unlocked after the main story mode is completed. In each reversed stage is a portal to a Bonus room. These rooms are designed for the more advanced Klonoa players. These rooms are also timed, which should encourage players to come back to try and beat their previous records.

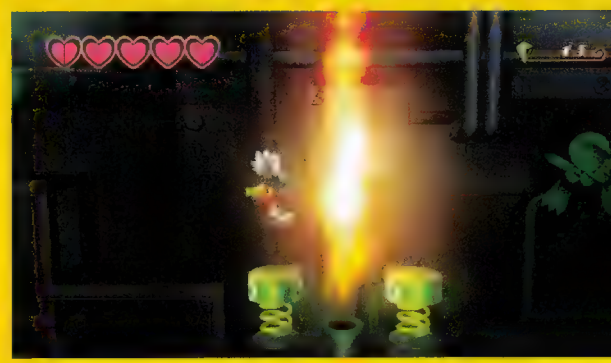
What would you say are the best new features to bring fans back and convince new players to experience Klonoa for the first time?
We went through the game and improved some enemy placements and re-tuned the controls. An additional feature in the North American version is the whirlwind attack. By shaking the Nunchuk or Wii Remote (depending on which control setup is being used), Klonoa will create a whirlwind causing enemies to move slower.

Anything you'd like to say to the fans?
Klonoa was able to make a comeback because it continues to be supported by so many people and I ask all of you for your continuous support of Klonoa. Thank you very much.

> "...I was a little relieved as those comments unexpectedly showed us how much fans care for Klonoa."

not a Klonoa anime/cartoon around to drive them to it. They're going to have to find it and then rise up to the challenge of mastering a single technique that evolves over 8 consecutively more lustrous and more difficult levels. The payoff in Klonoa is still reaching each colorful new Vision, and its final screen-filling 2-stage final boss.

If Namco Bandai ever decides to keep Klonoa's vision alive with a new dream, count me in, as long as they leave Hewpoe back at the ranch. Either that or give it some fangs.



Godfather II

Ode to a horse's head. Placed, gently, on a goombah's bed.

words Greg Orlando

Remember in Francis Ford Coppola's epic crime film *Godfather II* where the protagonist traveled to Cuba, stealthily infiltrated the president's mansion, and shot Fidel Castro right in the head?

Of course you don't. Had Coppola put that in his movie, he would have been laughed out of Hollywood and, likely, would now be known as the crazy guy on the park bench who smells vaguely of cat food.

The Godfather II video game by Electronic Arts gleefully offers this assassination scenario, and does so without the slightest bit of either shame or self-consciousness. Players, as a don in the Corleone family, must sneak their way into the former Cuban prime minister's mansion, avoid a series of patrolling guards, find a vantage point, and then bid a fond farewell to the part of their brains responsible for rational thought. Players won't need their cerebrums for this particular bit of nonsense, especially when the game—whoops!—decides, via cut scene, that a fatal head shot really just grazed Castro. Not only are players forced to swallow the ridiculous scenario, but they're also told their aim sucks. It's as if Electronic Arts, as a singular entity, came to the player's house and, at the appropriate moment, extended its middle finger.

"Each of the game's many businesses offers a delightfully violent puzzle to be solved."

To be fair, Godfather II only plunges to the depths of super-absurdity once. Yet once is more than enough here.

The third-person perspective Godfather II also keeps its devotion to the film's plot to a minimum, although when it lifts it does so with the grace of a chainsaw tonsillectomy. A particularly chilling scene involving the murder of a prostitute and the framing of a United States senator is translated here, and poorly only begins to hint at it. Coppola worked with light and music, highlighting a corpse under a bloody sheet and showing the absolute horror in the face of the senator. Electronic Arts turns the chilling scene into a dull mission requiring the player to convince the senator, via text tree manipulation, to visit a brothel. The tedious affair is then punctuated by a cut scene where the game lingers on the bloody sheet as if to say *isn't this awesome?* And, of course, the answer to this is, simply, *nuh-uh*.

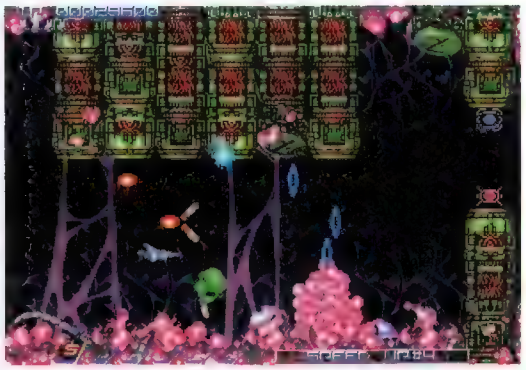
Move past its glaring weak spots, and the game offers a very passable blend of action and real-time strategy. Players must build and hold a criminal empire, enlist allies to join the family, and rub out any rivals. Each of the game's many businesses offers a delightfully violent puzzle to be solved. The goal here is to seize a property or, perhaps, to bomb it into oblivion. Rival gangs will fiercely defend their turf with both regular gun-toting guards as well as with more deadly made men; get past them, and it's necessary to "persuade" the business' owner to pay protection monies. As players acquire territories, rival families will counterattack and attempt to take over player-held businesses. When enemy families are weak, they'll try to blow a place up rather than try to hold it.

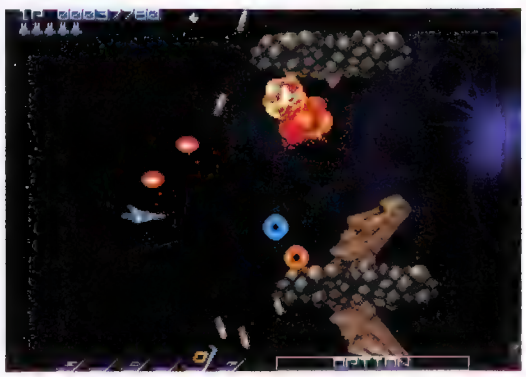
Godfather II works well as crime drama when it has the good sense to leave players to their own twisted devices. When it breaks from its formula to stretch the story or get creative, well, that's a crime that certainly doesn't pay.

parting shot

Despite a very passable blend of action and real-time strategy, it's an offer you can refuse, especially if you don't want to see a brilliant film property roughly handled.

System: WiiWare | Dev: M2 | Pub: Konami | Online: Leaderboards | ESRB: E | Available: Now



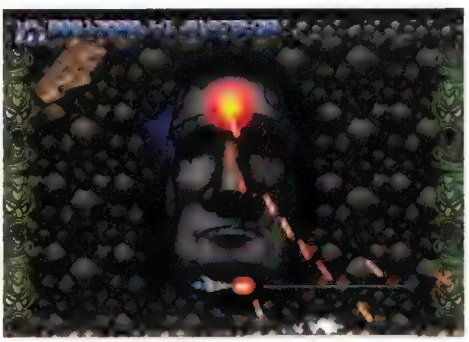


Gradius ReBirth

We all need Moai Gradius in life

Sometimes, when I'm playing a WiiWare, PSN, or Live title that features 16-bit style graphics, I find myself daydreaming about how clever and interesting video-games would be if we had settled on a standard. Instead of pushing the envelope, and letting technology dictate content, what would have happened if the industry had decided, "We're going to do 16bit for the next 25 years?"

Downloadable games seem to be hinting at this alternate universe. Stripped down to just game-play, titles like BIT.TRIP.BEAT are showing us what would have been possible with just a little more time in each era of gaming. Additionally, we get titles like Gradius ReBirth, which re-introduce old ideas into our modern era. After a little re-familiarization, I bet we'll start seeing some improvisation on the old themes.



To put it another way, Mega Man is to Cave Story what Gradius ReBirth is to ... something we haven't seen yet. But it can't hurt that the game is coming out again, to challenge us.

ReBirth is a remixed selection of old Gradius concepts in a new package, and it's as hard as MegaMan 9. Pain is pleasure in ReBirth, as players must become comfortable with screaming at their televisions in frustration every time they die. And you'll die often. As a hint of what's to come, the default setting on Gradius ReBirth is unlimited credits. You're a ship, and you fight enemies, collect power-ups, and balance the risk of keeping your ship underpowered to unlock better weaponry. One bullet, one wall, one enemy kills you, and you lose everything.

Get something to chew on. **Heather Anne Campbell**

parting shot

Unforgiving, satisfying, simple. It's so nice to just play games after suffering through so much cinema.

System: PS3 Xbox 360 | Dev: Tigon | Pub: Ubisoft | ESRB: T | Available: March 24 2009

Vin Diesel Wheelman

Neither Fast nor Furious

I've got two words for Tigon: art direction. The second Vin Diesel (or as he's known in Barcelona, Milo) gets out of the car in Wheelman with his Chiclets teeth and blank stare, the wheels come off. As a rule, one should never ape GTA without the engine, manpower and budget to at least come close. It's just too dang hard. Don't do the radio thing either...Just compose a nice score. Plus,there's no one here! Was there a plague or something? It's a shame too because Tigon may have been on to something had they stuck to designing a great game around the "Hollywood-style" stunt driving—game speak for "unhinging the camera"—and the promising car-melee system that kicks the game off well enough to make you want more. I stuck with Wheelman for a good three hours and just couldn't grab onto anything. Although I did enjoy some of the more unique missions—I've always wanted to tool around Spain on a scooter—the main story is not only vague but about as worn-out as these scenarios get (and you don't want to see these real-time cut scenes) and the action /shooting just misses the mark entirely. Leaving Wheelman's one redeeming quality; some fun to very fun open-world driving, via the many Street Showdown's, Rampage's, and "hot potato" pick-up and deliver runs that open up as you, well, do those other things. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

It wouldn't be fair for me to pass final judgement on a game I didn't finish...except to say that I didn't want to.

review | System: PSP | Developer: Alfa System | Publisher: Sega | ESRB: T | Online: Local Co-op | Available: Now

Phantasy Star PORTABLE

Finally, my Phantasy

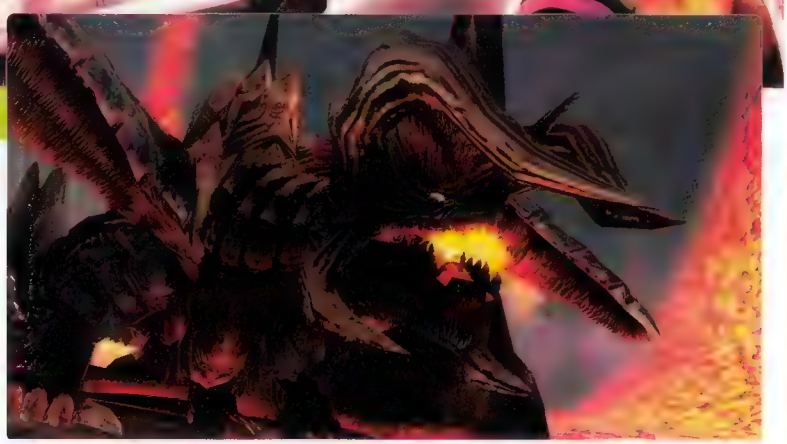
Words Dave Halverson

A long time ago on a console far-far away Sega's tent-pole RPG franchise, Phantasy Star, went Online.

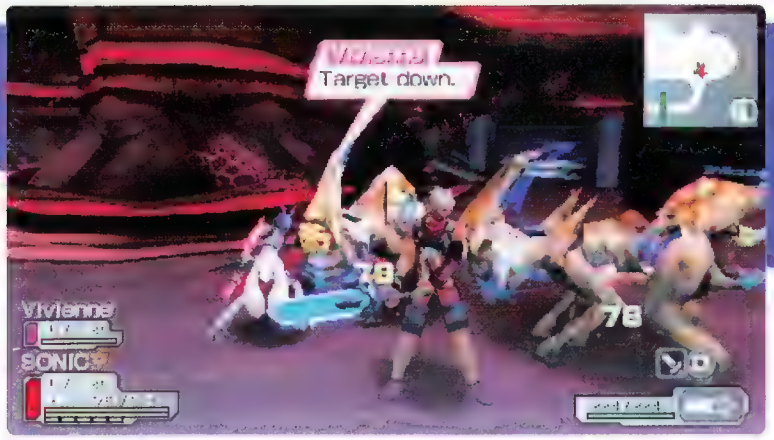
PSO was flush with the time-honored polish and palpable lore of the series' rich past, but this was a Star of a different galaxy. The busy towns and vast fields of the Algol Star System where I'd been waging turn-based war since I was knee-high to a beaker of Monomate had given way to a level-grinding dungeon-crawl starring a Human, Beast, CAST or Newman of my choosing. Sonic Team had done the unthinkable and released the JRPG into the wild—happy times. Diving headlong into the Offline mode, basking in the glory of my HUnewearl, all was right in the world until I emerged from the Caves of Ragol and came mano a wormo with single-player cyanide; De Rol Le. The only way to make a cooperative action-RPG feasible for a solo crawl is by either thinning the monster population, reining in the AI or having señor CPU dial up a few NPC party members. Until I met wonder worm I presumed I was experiencing offline AI. Silly me. I'm okay with level grinding to a point, but to level up enough to punch its ticket within a reasonable amount of time—say, 5-10 minutes—I would have to journey far beyond it.

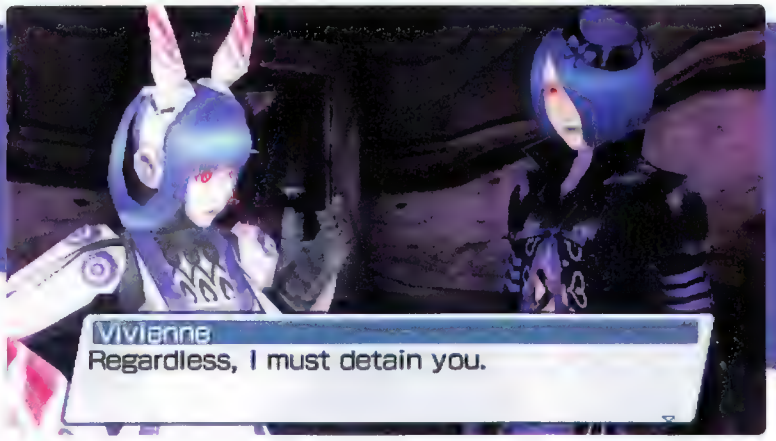
If Sonic Team hadn't anointed PSO with the musical equivalent of a crack I.V. and allowed me to sculpt my very own hunter/heroine it wouldn't have been so bad, but this was like biting into your favorite food and having it taste like Sasquatch armpit.

Hope sprang eternal when Phantasy Star Universe was announced with a 40+ hour single-player story mode as the main focus, but Sega left out the part about the vapid boy protagonist Ethan Waber, wooden character models, dated tech, unbearable voice acting, spiritless gameplay, an atypical soundtrack, awkward animation and quite possibly the worst initial hour of gameplay in RPG history. I skipped the



"...the hypnotic soundtrack and overall feel are pure PSO (with a CPU party, ahem)..."





expansion pack.

Nearly 10 years after my Phantasy fizzled on Dreamcast, I don't know which is harder to believe—that the game I wanted Phantasy Star Online to be has actually arrived, or that it's arrived on the seemingly left-for-dead Sony PSP. Never before has a system sold so well—upwards of 300,000 units per month—and been so neglected, although things are looking up for 2009.

Taking place prior to the events of the Ambition of the Illuminus Expansion Pak, Phantasy Star Portable may be the direct descendant of PSU in terms of time and space, but the hypnotic soundtrack and overall feel are pure PSO (with a CPU party, ahem) affixed to a vastly improved version of PSU's base foundation.

After joining the Human, Beast, CAST or Newman race, as a male or female Hunter, Ranger, or Force (initially) you're greeted by your instructor Elite Guardian Laia Martinez who does her best to orient newcomers in all things Phantasy Star as painlessly as possible before (and a bit after) introducing Vivienne—the prototype CAST you'll be living with until you decide it's time to back away from the PSP—with the ability to reason and adapt, as well as wield a wicked Baton and relay images directly to Guardian HQ.

PS Portables base structure emphasizes simplicity for seamless, nearly load-free gaming on the go through a combination of traditional menus and a simple point-and-click navigation reticule to access people and places on the map. Real-time hubs are the bomb on console, but there's nothing worse than a series of doors and loading screens when you're trying to manage your character and move through a story on a handheld system. Sonic Team and Alfa System opted to utilize that memory for extensive verbal exchanges by actors who don't sound like they were recruited from an open mic night at the Kalamzoo Applebee's, like PSUs.

The story revolves around Vivienne as she relates to you (and you to her) in a pseudo BioWare-style act/react fashion as the mission you're working on escalates from a routine smash and dash to an interplanetary crisis that touches on everything from terrorism to intolerance to the re-emergence of SEED, and ultimately something far more diabolical. In any case, when it comes to mission-based dungeon crawls, no matter how great the story, all roads lead to the same thing—exterminating various small, medium, large, and "holy-crap!" size monsters while negotiating an ever-burgeoning series of labyrinthine sprawls where, due to the repetitive nature of the genre, one minor annoyance can add up to a king-size headache.

Where Sonic Team stumbled transitioning their "Universe" from concept to 3D, Alfa Systems penchant for high-caliber manga and mecha-influenced character models, honed on games like Tales of Innocence, Gunparade March and Neon Genesis Evangelion 2, makes all the difference. The main character models in PSP easily best PSU's, even on 360, via remarkably detailed costume designs, smoother edges, and superior animation that influences tighter control and better agility. It's a shame we're not set up to capture PSP screens (we're working on it now that we have proof of life). My Human Female Fightmaster looks spectacular in her classical tunic, boots and shorts carrying a 6-foot claymore battle sword like it's a toothpick. Aesthetics go a long way when you're adventuring along with pervasive level design and especially creature designs, and AI. dungeon crawls are notorious for being repetitious and long in the tooth, a bullet PSP dodges by way of 15-20 minute missions (just complex enough) along a more active route. The real surprise, however, is the quality of the AI. Not that it's incredibly "aware," but in the way the creatures seem to key in your party's proximity and change up attack patterns accordingly. They're surprisingly adaptive for a handheld horde and nicely diversified between mecha and creature and you travel from planet to planet. The nastiest SEED early on are the massive dragons, followed by stubborn Dimmagolus and the wanker of the waterways itself, De Rol Le... Not so tough when I'm leveled up are you, bitch?

The weapons, items and abilities—contingent on the battle type you choose—are another big draw. Nobody does RPG accoutrements better than Phantasy Star. ...Star Wars... ha! Character, weapon, and item customization are river deep yet easy to manage and never a burden. You can hold up to six weapons and six items in your Action Palette (similar to but cleaner than PSU's; also tethered to a better inventory system) which you can select, use, or equip by merely holding down the circle button, cycling to what you want, and releasing. Alfa System does a great job with the PSP's button diagram too. A simple strafe and lock-on (which can be set to click on and off rather than holding down the L button) makes ranged attacks a breeze along with an equally accommodating lock-on for close combat and a first-person camera to help you bring down the game's impressive winged monstrosities.

Phantasy Star Portable is also exceptionally well balanced. Dying, as in having to replay an entire map, takes some doing. Standing in front of a marauding dragon switching your rifle element from fire to ice like a blonde meat stick certainly does the trick but otherwise it's a rare map difficult enough to deplete the supply of Scape Dolls and healing agents peppered throughout each mission. The game is real-live 20+ hours long (minimum) with no artificial fillers, and nary a smidgen of repetition or requisite level grinding. Granted I spent a lot of time in preparation, storing and/or selling unwanted items and hardware, setting up Photon Arts, attaching add-ons and so on (this is as close as I come to Star Wars-like sci-fi fandom), but so I'm betting will most.

For all my whining about online co-op I have to say...I've been 100% right. Like the hack//G.U. trilogy, Phantasy Star Portable's virtual co-op drew me in as much as human co-op drives me away. These party members don't horde items or spew unrelated drivel. They're in it with me, and I'll take PSP's CPU AI over an ordinary human any day. Left to their own devices my entire squad in Too Human couldn't kill time, but the unruly little beast boy that joined us on Moatoob was bum rushing Gohma Dillas (think mecha-rhino) to keep them off of Vivienne. He kept dying and healing himself even though I was flush with healing items. See, now that's co-operative.

parting shot

PS Portable is so much more than what you'd expect from a handheld ARPG. The visuals are striking from start to finish with continuously diverse environments; the overall system has been wonderfully adapted to the portable platform, and the score is pure PS euphoria. The voice acting is solid throughout, on a story I'd consider predictable if it wasn't so flush with twists and homages, and it's nice and loooong. I missed my PSP! More please!

review

System: DS | **Developer:** Rockstar Leeds in association with Rockstar North | **Publisher:** Rockstar Games | **ESRB:** M | **Available:** March 16, 2009

grand theft auto

CHINATOWN WARS

Say uncle

words

"buy low and sell high but watch out for security cameras"

Jamming a modern-day GTA with all the superfluities into a DS cart is one thing, but doing so whilst adding swell new features that deserve a spot on the console roster and a story that jumps off the small screen with all the vigor of its console brethren is truly commendable. And then there's the technology to consider. Rockstar Leeds, with support from fellow Rockstar's North and NY, took the development of their first-ever GTA for a Nintendo system very, very seriously. Not only is this latest iteration of Liberty City vast, spanning three major islands and over a dozen suburbs, but it's as "aware" respectively as any game in the series. The smallest details, such as mailboxes and tiny crates, have proper physics and the tiny pedestrians act like, well, tiny pedestrians. Hang around in a residential zone long enough and you'll notice people leaving (and returning to) their homes; getting into taxis, shopping, conversing, arguing and, of course, reacting to your abrupt invasion of their space. Run them over and they bleed (rather profusely), smack 'em around and they run (some out-and-out bolt), jack their transportation and, okay, they still run off screaming. The citizens of Liberty City have always been big on self-preservation.

Chinatown Wars begins by running you through the game's driving paces, which can be tricky. The new Evasion System has you running police cruisers off the road and into other cars to disable them, bringing down your wanted status in the process. Anything below two wanted stars and things shift back to the old lay-low-and-evade rules, which is easier said than done since Chinatown is jam-packed with more badges than a Krispy Krème convention, both in cruisers and on foot. This version of Liberty City was also designed with untold miles of two-lane roads (with no parking), making high-speed pursuits a rather touchy affair. Threading your car or motorcycle through traffic, peeking at the map screen to stay on course when time is ticking away, is especially prickly, although the AI is adequately forgiving and over time as you get to know the city and nuance of the different vehicles driving becomes a much more exacting enterprise. Until then you can set waypoint markers directly on the street by turning on the top-screen GPS on your PDA. The assortment of vehicles milling about Chinatown Wars is truly humbling. Choppers, trikes, buses, jet-skis, boats, trucks, fire engines, vans, sports cars… The selection (upwards of 100 vehicles) is nearly as impressive as the fact that they all handle accordingly. The action and gun play work well too, with a handy lock-on for strafing and melee moves and some nifty animation for hopping over low walls. Huang can dash for a good clip by tapping the B-button, and throwing grenades and the like is as simple as flicking the stylus in the direction of your target. The DS's stylus gets a nice workout in Chinatown; hotwiring ignitions, inking tattoos, assembling sniper rifles, paying tolls, safe cracking, disarming bombs and digging through rubbish are just a few of the ways Rockstar use the stylus to engage the player as the drama unfolds.

Like any great game of GTA, as in life, nothing says "I love me" like cold, hard, cash. Money buys better guns and ammo (now delivered right to your door via ammunation.net), lavish safe houses, exotic cars, and beautiful Asian body work (nudge). Hijacking delivery vans, taxis, ambulances, and Dragon Noodle Delivery wagons are all descent enough day jobs but the big money is in dealing drugs. Liberty City is stuffed with drug dealers (depicted on your map by happy blue smiley faces) selling coke, heroin, weed, downers, acid, and ecstasy, and there's always a blow-out sale somewhere, so buy low and sell high but watch out for security cameras. If you're really ambitious use some of that drug money to mix up a gaggle of Molotov cocktails (another cool stylus game) at the nearest gas station and begin your assault on the city's security grid. There are 100 security cameras in Liberty City, and a secure drug dealer is a happy drug dealer, so what you spend on gas you'll save on stash, plus the only road to 100% completion lies in nicking every last one. The game's drug trade alone, should you choose to pursue a career in sales, is massive in scale. Street Races, Stunt Jumps, and Random Encounters will also earn you money and getting there is as easy as tapping a point on the map to set the shortest legal route. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, awaits.

parting shot

Bloody good things come in small packages.

System: Wii, PSP | **Developer:** Acquire | **Publisher:** Ubisoft | **ESRB:** M | **Available:** Now

review

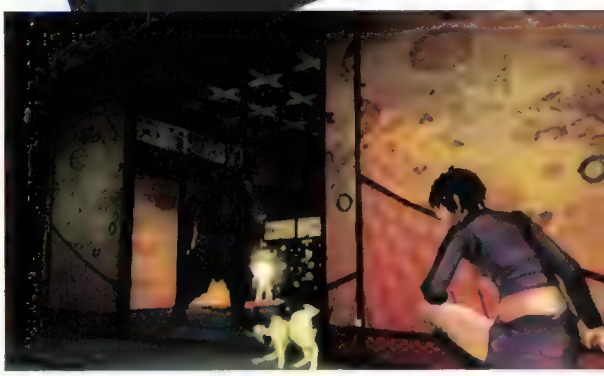
Tenchu
Shadow Assassins
Nowhere to hide

Since its first-party debut on PlayStation back in 1998 Tenchu has been revised, revisited and recycled so many times that Tenchu the 13th might be a more appropriate name, even though the series integer stands at 17 with the introduction of Shadow Assassins.

After Acquire's Stealth Assassin follow-up, Birth of Stealth Assassins (for PS2) distributed in North America by Activision, FROM Software grabbed the Japanese distribution rights and K2 took over developer duties, creating the seminal game in the series Wrath of Heaven (a.k.a. Return from Darkness on Xbox). K2 followed up with my favorite game in the series, Fatal Shadows, published by Sega. From there From Software decided to take a detour developing Tenchu Z in house. The underrated sole "next-gen" game in the franchise featured deep character creation and customization, online multi-player and an extensive story mode set in a plausible Feudal Japan landscape. At what point From Software decided to simultaneously lateral to Acquire (who hasn't exactly been lighting the world on fire since) and essentially de-stealth gaming's last living ninja/stealth franchise I do not know. I'm not sure which is worse though, the world's most un-stealth-like stealth game or the fact that I was forced to play the front half of the game as an awkward Rikimaru to get to Ayame's stages. The decision to make-over (also see "Americanize") one of gaming's most recognizable and exquisitely designed female characters (wow, a mini-skirt, how inspired) is almost as puzzling as playing a stealth game with some guy channeling Wong from Balls of Fury barking commands at me that are simultaneously being broadcast on-screen via bright animated icons as if I'm both inept and illiterate. What is this closed captioning for the gaming impaired? What would anyone that needs this much tutelage be doing buying a stealth action game? I know we're behind in education but has it gotten so bad that our friends in the East think we need simultaneous audio and video instruction? There's a manual in the DVD case; I checked. And what's with the fixed and tethered camera? Ninja's can't turn around? Why can't I squat and creep at will? I can snap a guy's neck hanging upside down but I need a little box to boost me over fences? Strafe and run by holding down the same button? Extinguishing lanterns creates a 50 ft. stream of black mist? Projectile shurikens send 250 lb. guards flying backwards? And while we're at it, where exactly does a ninja carry a large bamboo tube full of water? Is that why Rikimaru walks like he has to go number 2? And in what Feudal lore do samurai use phrases like "Just wait you turd"…turd, really? What have you done with our Tenchu? Where have you taken it, you, you…turd!

"Pssst, hey you, with the PSP... Don't press the circle button!"

On the bright side—yes, there is one—some of the new Ninjutsu, such as using the Hayate technique to jump along rafters and surveying your surroundings with the Mind's Eye, work well and there's some good level design here, especially late in the game once you finally reach the halfway/Ayame mark. In fact, the game improves dramatically via Ayame's ability to scale walls and make use of the Shinobi Cat, the best new feature in the game. Slipping into the mind of a cat to scurry into tight spaces, fetch items and plot a course is a mechanic I'd like to see put to use in a Fatal Shadows or Wrath of Heaven-style follow up on Xbox 360 and PS3. The tech in Shadow Assassins just doesn't get it done. The water, which plays a vital role in the game, sucks on Wii, which we know can do impressive aqua, but it looks more like quicksand on PSP. The ability to press a button and drown someone 5 ft. away seems a bit of a stretch too. As for Ayame, please, just give her back. This new female character is really cool but she's not Ayame. Why not say she's Rin from Fatal Shadows all grown up? The perfect scenario? Now that Tenchu is with the good hands people at Ubisoft give it to Assassin's Creed producer Jade Raymond for a Prince of Persia-style makeover. Now that would be something worth sneaking around for.



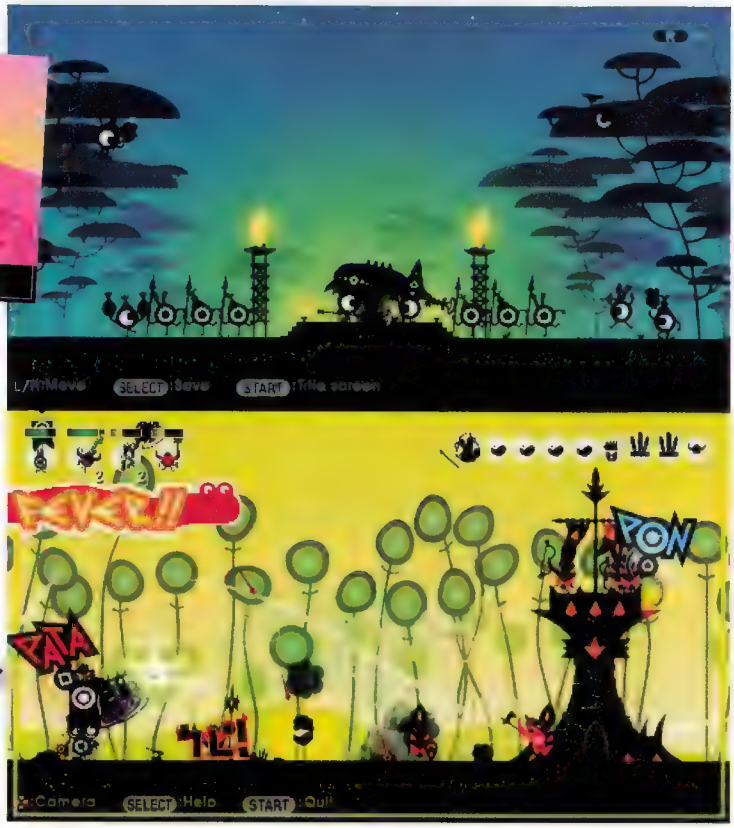
parting shot

More at home on PSP than Wii due to the shorter missions and poorly executed Wii Remote/Nunchuck controls, Shadow Assassins still isn't on par with the last two offerings from K2 or FROMs own Tenchu Z. Stealth gaming should feel limber and light but SA feels heavy and clumsy. The ambience is way off too; obnoxious and overly scripted where it should be silent but deadly. You can partially subdue the ham fisted end to end tutorial but you shouldn't have to. Japanese developers like Acquire should play a little MGS4, Velvet Assassin, or Sly Cooper before they take on such a specialized genre.

review | System: PSP | Developer: Pyramid / Japan Studio | Publisher: SCEA | ESRB: E | Multi: 1-4 Players | Available: May 2009

Patapon 2

Let loose the Dogapons of war



For some reason, LocoRoco and Patapon have always gone together for me. They were kind of like siblings, I guess; those two new kids down the block at the Sony household that seemed really interesting if not a little crazy. That feeling was strengthened when sequels to both games not only wound end up hitting in such close proximity to one another time-wise, but followed similar pattens in how they compared to their original games.

Patapon 2–much like LocoRoco 2–doesn't feel as much as an out-and-out sequel as it does a refining of and expansion upon the first Patapon. The basics stay the same; you, as God, must help lead your followers, the Patapons, as they continue on their quest to reach Earthend. Playing out in a visually striking world of side-scrolling real-time strategy action, you'll issue orders to your Patapon army via four-button command combinations that must be done in rhythm with the game's music as you do battle with both opposing forces and the resident creatures of the strange island you've washed ashore on.

There are a few notable additions here–new units like the Hero or the flying Toripon, a different system for troop creation and advancement, and multiplayer–which make things more interesting for Patapon veterans, but might actually complicate gameplay a bit more for people new to the series. In fact, if you haven't played the original, I'd probably suggest you do that first; you'll then be better prepared to appreciate the changes that Patapon 2 brings with it. **Eric L. Patterson**

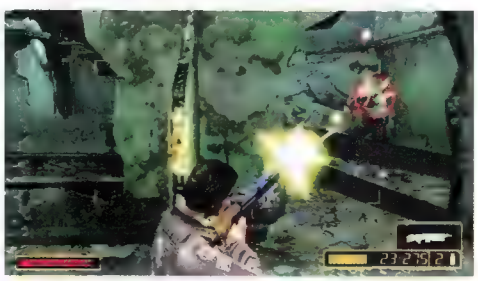
parting shot

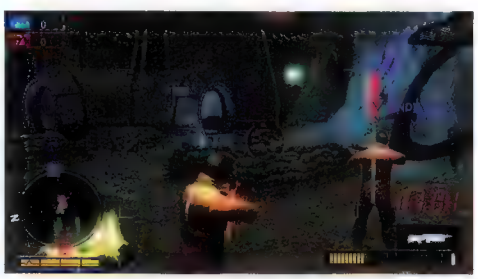
Patapon 2 doesn't break new ground like the original Patapon did, but still does a great job in offering up ample amounts of its unique blend of stylish and strategy.

review | System: PSP | Developer: Sony Bend | Publisher: SCEA | ESRB: M | Multi: 1 - 8 Player | Available: Now

Resistance: Retribution

I "heart" PSP





More than any other platform, the PSP continues to torture me in a love/hate relationship. Most of the time it just sits on my desk—covered in dust—taunting me with its potential, making me hate it for the total lack of compelling content available on it. But then, for a few months, I fall head over heels for it; it happened last year when I couldn't put down God of War: Chains of Olympus, and now it's happening all over again with Resistance: Retribution, another AAA first-party effort that's reminded me how big and beautiful the PSP's sexy screen is, and how much power the portable really has hiding under its hood.

Sony Bend, who's already succeeded where so many others have failed, proving a decent shooter can be developed on the single-sticked system with their Syphon Filter series, deserves full credit here. Because the running-and-gunning—aided by an intuitive auto-lock mechanic—is near flawless, players are free to appreciate the pretty visuals and engaging storytelling, without the burden of fighting the controls. This is important, not only for the fast-paced firefights, but because Retribution's narrative, complemented by an easy-on-the-eyes presentation, is better than its console counterparts'. I quickly found myself more invested in new hero James Grayon's twisty tale against the Chimera than I ever was in Nathan Hale's.

Couple the compelling story and engaging gameplay with some seriously robust multi-player modes and PS3 interoperability that's surprisingly more cool than gimmicky, and you've got the best reason in a long time to charge up your PSP. In fact, as much as I dig Resistance's portable debut, I appreciate it even more for reminding me my PSP is more than just a pretty paperweight. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot

The folks behind the PSP's excellent Syphon Filter series deliver another solid shooter to the system that "can't do shooters." But the tight mechanics actually take a back seat to Retribution's storytelling, eye-popping presentation, and slew of online and interoperability options. A top-notch first-party effort that will have you falling back in love with your PSP.

System: NDS | **Developer:** Nintendo R&D1 / TNX | **Publisher:** Nintendo | **Online:** 1 Player | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Now

review

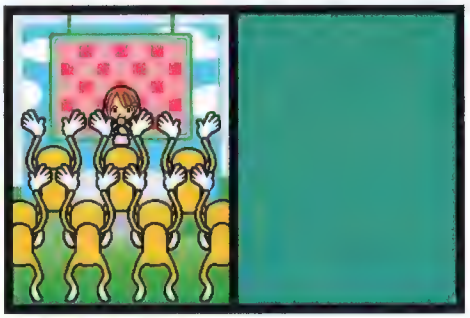
Rhythm Heaven

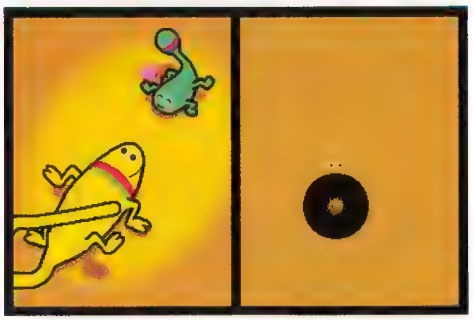
No more kaaaamo~ne? I suppose.

I never expected Rhythm Heaven to come out in the United States. Its predecessor–Rhythm Tengoku on the GBA–had bad timing in regard to the market (not to mention elements probably a bit too Japanese for American tastes), and for whatever reason I assumed this DS sequel would join the "lost cause" club with Mother 3 and Tingle's Rosy Rupeeland.

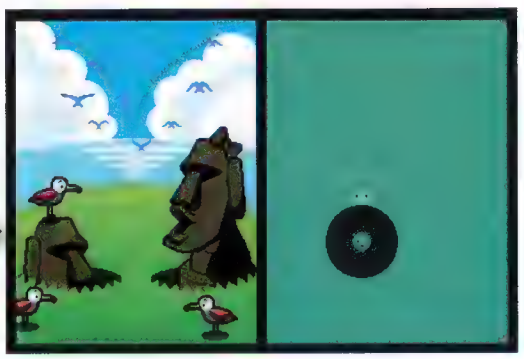
Well here I am, proven wrong, and thank heaven for that. Rhythm Heaven can best be described as a version of WarioWare where the minigames aren't as mini and where everything is based around music. One minute you're a starship, blasting invaders in time to a bumpin' beat, and the next you're one of three ghosts whose band's entire set list is basically nothing but epic finishes.

Like WarioWare, they are a series of simple concepts that strung together provide for an amazing array of challenges to be beat (then golded, then perfected) that can be enjoyed by both casual and hardcore players alike. Rhythm Heaven is an example of the fun that video games can offer us in its simplest and purest form, and is undeniably one of the best DS titles ever to see release in that regard.





My worry over the translation process was mostly for naught. The only gameplay changes from the Japanese version were a few minor tweaks, and most of the songs that featured vocals turned out shockingly well in their new English forms. Most, I say, because sadly my two favorite tracks–Fan Club and The Dazzles–went from lovable to lame thanks to an unfortunate choice in singers. **Eric L. Patterson**



parting shot

A ridiculous amount of fun packed into a tiny DS cartridge, Rhythm Heaven's only real flaw is a bit of jet lag from its trip across the ocean.

System: DS | **Developer:** Monolith/Banpresto | **Publisher:** Atlus | **ESRB:** Teen | **Available:** April 28

preview

Super Robot Taisen OG Saga: Endless Frontier

It's super, thanks for asking

There's a very good chance that by the time the credits roll, Super Robot Taisen OG Saga will occupy a space on my short list among the best handheld RPGs ever made; and as you've probably discerned by now, portable RPGs are giving their console brethren a run for their recurring turn-based money. What makes SRT so special is the combination of a great overhead map reminiscent of Phantasy Star 2, that lets you explore and interact within detailed environments, and a great battle system that combines real-time chains and jiggles, I mean juggles, like something out of a Treasure platformer with the ability to switch between characters for continuous multi-character chain combos. It's like human racquetball! Otherwise, the story has just the right amount of adventure, humor, and yes, intrigue (and it's not so long in the tooth that you doze off). Okay so Kaguya Nanbu has obviously swayed me a bit—you don't know the half of it, wait until you see her Overdrive attack—and Aschen Brodel is yummy too, but let's not forget that Haken Browning is one of the coolest leading dudes since Vash the Stampede. **Dave Halverson**

"...you don't know the half of it, wait until you see her Overdrive attack..."

Yakuza 3

Okinawa Five-O

words Casey Loe

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Sega | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced US

It's been a hard couple of years for Kiryu Kazuma. Fresh out of jail for a crime he didn't commit, he landed in a series of progressively bloodier gang wars. But Kiryu climbed over a pile of bodies to rise to the top of Japan's criminal underground, and without ever doing so much as a single bad deed. Lest he find a moment's solace in the hardware transition from PS2 to PS3, Kiryu was sent back in time to play the role of legendary samurai Miyamoto Musashi in the Kenzan spin-off, establishing himself as a paragon of strength and virtue in yet another historical period. That's a level of badassitude that should make even Master Chief and Marcus Fenix feel like total pussies, but it hasn't leave our hero with any further to climb.

So Sega shipped Kiryu off to Okinawa, leaving his skills to dull as he managed a small orphanage similar to the one in which he grew up. The first few hours of Yakuza 3 are a staggering bore; while Yakuza 1 had you trying to figure out who stole a billion yen from the mob, Yakuza 3 has you trying to figure out which of your orphans stole $10 from another one's purse. And then it's time to teach them valuable lessons about believing in themselves, supporting one another, not judging people by the color of their skin and OH GOD KILL ME NOW. Fortunately, things do pick up when the orphanage starts getting hassled by a local gang hired to convince everyone in the neighborhood to sell their prime beachfront property so that powerful political and business interests can build a new tourist resort. Kiryu does the only logical thing—sell his orphanage at a huge profit, buy a cheaper building elsewhere, and use the extra money to hire some help so he doesn't have to put 12-year old Haruka in charge when he's out clubbing. No, lying. Kiryu instead dons his old snakeskin leisure suit and starts a bloody international war against multiple yakuza clans and the private interests that control them, causing countless unnecessary deaths. Thank *God*.

The action in Yakuza 3 is split between the familiar Tokyo district of Kamurocho and the new Okinawan setting of Naha, where mobsters wear Hawaiian shirts and the local cuisine sounds comically disgusting. If there's one thing the Yakuza series gets right, it's the feeling of *being* somewhere—GTA IV's Liberty City may be impressive in scope, but upon closer inspection its storefronts are just blurry smudges with inoperable doors. Yakuza 3 only gives you a few square miles of turf, but the throngs of pedestrians, richly textured details and scores of open businesses truly bring it to life. Like last year's Kenzan spin-off, Yakuza 3 approaches Shenmue's success in making you feel like you're living another life

"Resident Evil 5 proved that it's possible to really enjoy a game while still wishing for a drastic reboot of its franchise, and Yakuza 3 evokes a similar feeling."

in another part of the world.

Sadly, Yakuza 3 doesn't channel the power of the PS3 into many other productive directions. A lengthy, mandatory installation allows the game to transition into battles with only a few seconds of loading (and without cutting to a black screen), but there's still plenty of "Now Loading" prompts when transitioning from one area to the next. The battle system has been slightly refined, with a different set of default moves and more focus placed on weaponry, but it's fundamentally the same as the one in Yakuza 2. There's a new foot-chase mechanic that allows you to run down foes or flee the cops with dramatic leaps over garbage cans and shoulder rolls over parked cars, but that's about it in the way of new ideas or refinements. Despite the increased capacity of the Blu-Ray disc, the game continues to fall far short of being fully voiced, and the game's main quest is no longer or deeper than it was in past installments.

Instead, the developers have once again focused on mini-games, doubling the amount of wacky things you can do between quest objectives. You can now golf, bowl, hit balls at the batting cage, sing karaoke, play a simple shooter or Answer X Answer (a real Sega-made quiz game) at the arcade, play darts, billiards, shogi, mahjongg, hanafuda, and various casino games. You can visit strip clubs (nudity free, alas), date ten different cabaret club girls, and even recruit and manage cabaret girls of your own, dressing, accessorizing, and making them up to adapt to the ever-evolving tastes of your customers. (Yes, this is exactly as creepy as it sounds.) And of course, there are a hundred or so straight-up side quests in which you do everything from bringing catnip to cats to taking down international kidnapping rings. The numbers of possible diversions is staggering, and add to each city's bustling, wide-open feel. But it destroys the illusion of the fast-moving storyline to leave your friends in peril while you bowl a few lanes or sing some karaoke, and the balance between story (which remains short and sweet, at around 20 hours or so) and side quests (which can easily fill another 40 hours) is way off. The Yakuza series doesn't need more mini-games; it needs some compelling side narratives, along the lines of GTAIV's The Lost and the Damned.

Resident Evil 5 proved that it's possible to really enjoy a game while still wishing for a drastic reboot of its franchise, and Yakuza 3 evokes a similar feeling. The backstreet brawls that were once exciting feel rote, and the process of winning over cabaret-clubs girls to unlock their side quests has become a chore. But the fundamentals of the series remain compelling. The event scenes are beautifully done, with strong performances from A-list Japanese talent. The new characters in this installment are all interesting and believable, and once you get out of the goddamn orphanage, the story is as twisty and thrilling as you'd expect from a Yakuza game (and without degenerating into implausible silliness, as Yakuza 2's did). Role-playing as folk hero Kiryu Kazuma is always a pleasure for those (like me) who hate being forced into the shoes of the sociopath protagonists of Grand Theft Auto and Saint's Row games, and is just one of many things that give Yakuza a completely different flavor from western-developed open-world games.

But will we ever see it here? Sega of America says that an American localization isn't currently in the works, but that it isn't completely off the table either. There's still hope, Yakuza fans, so let Sega know what you think. Yakuza 3 may not be everything you want it to be, but it's still worth the trouble.

parting shot

With four releases in a little over three years, the lack of innovation is beginning to take a toll on the Yakuza franchise. But as much as I complain, I'm still hooked on the series' top-notch storytelling and beautifully realized settings. I'll buy Yakuza 4 in a heartbeat.

System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Sega/imageepoch | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced US

7th Dragon

Why not call it 666th Dragon? Are there Wal-Marts in Japan?

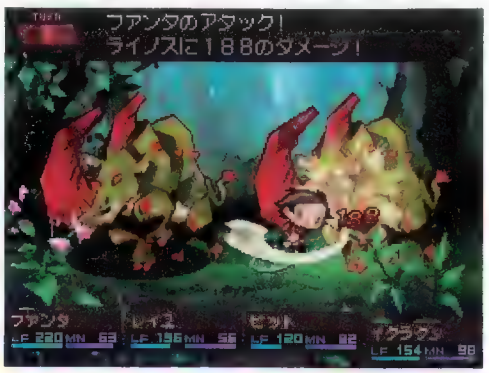
words Casey Loe

The casual-friendly focus of Japan's DS market has proven to be a high hurdle for hardcore game developers. But Kazuya Niinou's Etrian Odyssey series scored a breakout hit by tapping into nostalgia for a long-passed era of RPG dungeon crawls that were tough, gratifying, and unburdened by long-winded narratives. Now Niinou has brought his love of retro role-playing to Sega, where Phantasy Star and Skies of Arcadia producer Rieko Kodama hopes to introduce them to a more mainstream audience.

The most obvious change from Etrian Odyssey to 7th Dragon is the shift from first-person dungeons to the more popular Dragon Quest-style overhead perspective. But the more significant change is the one that screenshots don't show; instead of following a standard linear progression as most RPGs do, 7th Dragon takes a page from the Might & Magic and Romancing Saga series in allowing players to do pretty much whatever they want. There are a handful of choke points where you have to accomplish a specific mission to gain access to a new region of the world, but once you do you're free to either advance the storyline or wander the world in search of side quests and optional dungeons. Two of the game's most compelling objectives are optional: slaying dragons (boss enemies that can be seen on your map and never respawn once defeated), and stomping out the fields of toxic flowers that the dragons have spread throughout the world. There are 666 dragons to kill, and in an inspired touch, a counter on the lower screen keeps track of exactly how many remain.

Those changes aside, 7th Dragon might as well be Etrian Odyssey III. The battle system is basically identical, with the only real twist being the ability for each character to use a single-turn stat boost three times per game day. The traditional Etrian Odyssey character abilities have been juggled around and condensed into seven classes, each of which has multiple skill trees, allowing characters of the same class to be taken in entirely different directions. But there's no overlooking the fact that 7th's

> "Those changes aside, 7th Dragon might as well be Etrian Odyssey III."



Dragon's Mage is just a modified version of Etrian Odyssey Alchemist, its Fighter is almost exactly a Landsknecht, its Princess is half Troubadour and half Hexer, and so on. The character art feels like a shoddy rip-off of Yuji Himukai's Etrian Odyssey designs, and the game's sub-systems of monster drops, equipment slots, character leveling and even the game's font and menu design are lifted straight from Niinou's previous franchise. 7th Dragon even has all the same dumb flaws: Why do 22 Bird Wings have to take 22 separate inventory slots instead of being combined into one? Why is there a strict limit on the number of side quests one can simultaneously pursue? Why can't they write longer skill descriptions that competently explain what the more involved skills do? Oddly, one of the few things that does feel significantly different about 7th Dragon is the soundtrack, even though it's by the exact same guy (the famed Yuzo Koshiro). It's still good, but I prefer Etrian Odyssey's heavily layered style to 7th Dragon's simpler melodies.

With a solid grounding in the concepts of Etrian Odyssey and plenty of cool new ideas, I'm a little surprised that I don't love 7th Dragon anywhere near as much. Don't get me wrong—I'm having a blast with it, and it hasn't left my DS for a month. But I'm not as hooked as I was with either Etrian Odyssey game. Part of the problem is the effect the open-world structure has on the game's difficulty balance; if you meticulously pursue side quests and explore off-the-beaten-path areas (as most serious RPG fans do), you'll end up so overleveled that most of your missions won't provide any real challenge. The dungeon designs are straightforward and much less interesting than they were in the Etrian Odyssey games, and the overhead perspective robs a lot of the drama from the boss encounters—seeing little dragon icons running in loops on your map doesn't come close to capturing the terror of turning a corner to spot a deadly F.O.E. in your path. The dragon battles are fun, but with a party of four characters instead of five and an easier difficulty level, they aren't as intense or strategic as they could be.

Of course, Etrian Odyssey's tough-as-nails difficulty put off as many people as it attracted, and it was smart of Sega to bring that franchise's deep and enjoyable character customization elements to a much wider audience. This is a game that any RPG fan can enjoy, and I'm certainly no exception. But I'd swap it for a real Etrian Odyssey III in a heartbeat.

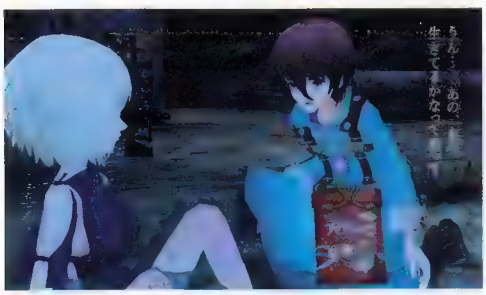
parting shot

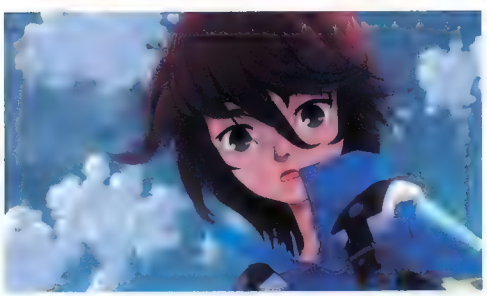
7th Dragon builds on a lot of Etrian Odyssey's great ideas, but plays it safer with easier battles, straightforward dungeon designs and modern RPG trappings. That makes it easier to like, but harder to love.

FRAGILE

Redefining the "funiki game"

words Dai Kohama





Ruins—buildings bereft of human life, softly crumbling to dust. Abandoned urban spaces may provoke feelings of fear and sadness, but stepping inside them can be an oddly serene experience. Bandai Namco's Wii "RPG", Fragile, takes its inspiration from such spaces, eliciting the mystique and romance inherent in modern ruins.

Fragile begins on a dying, near-future Earth, its inhabitants decimated by an unexplained catastrophe. All that remain are spirits wandering amidst decaying urban landscapes, as the forests gradually reclaim the land. The handful of humans that still live travel from place to place, searching for other survivors.

At the end of a brief summer, a boy named Seto buries his grandfather, the only other person he has ever known. Seto finds a letter from his grandfather that night, bidding that he travel in the direction the sun rises, where a giant radio tower can be seen in the distance. "You may find other people there", suggests the letter—the only clue the boy has. With nothing else to do but slowly starve, Seto heads east.

Fragile is a work by Kentaro Kawashima, an unsung master of the "funiki game"—a Japanese term for games that present such a compelling ambience, or funiki, that gameplay becomes a secondary consideration. Kawashima's previous games include 7 and Venus & Braves, both cult-hit, Japan-only PlayStation 2 RPGs. For Fragile, his team oversaw game design and art direction, but hard development was handled by tri-Crescendo, a name you may recognize from Eternal Sonata on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Like that title, Fragile is an aesthetically beautiful game, but one that has considerable gameplay problems.

I had hoped direction from an experienced team like Kawashima's might result in a quality game experience, but it was not to be. I'm a big fan of Fragile, but I have to admit the core gameplay is a disappointment. When regarded as a funiki game, however, it almost doesn't matter. Eternal Sonata may have been pretty, but it failed for lack of heart. Fragile, on the other hand, is brimming with it. Part of it is the graphics, certainly—among the best on Wii—but mostly is has to do with an intangible something that lies between the deeply human story, melancholy music, and eerie, silent vistas of a ruined Japan.

What is the actual game like? Any amount of couching a critique in my genuine respect for the game won't help much, so I'll give it to you straight: Imagine a 12 to 15 hour long Silent Hill with no puzzles and laughably easy combat. The only really challenge comes when your weapon randomly breaks, leaving you defenseless. An RPG this is not, despite the genre listed on the box. Instead, it's an exercise in third person action mediocrity. Not egregiously bad—collision and cameras work fine, the Wiimote-as-flashlight device is well implemented—but tedious. Much like Rule of Rose, another funiki game with absent gameplay and stunning presentation, your enjoyment of Fragile will depend on your ability to tune combat out, concentrating instead on the wonder of immersion in its ruined world.

The art, story, music, concept and ambience of Fragile are so wonderful—and so unprecedented, for post-apocalyptic Western games like Fallout 3 emphasize the horror of ruins rather than their beauty—that I would call it a must play. Despite its tepid, if workmanlike gameplay, I can think of few Japanese Wii games that deserve a Western release more than Fragile.

parting shot

Forget gameplay, and come for the immersion. Fragile is one of the most unique and beautiful games yet to appear on Wii.

System: PlayStation 3 | **Developer:** From Software | **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced US

DEMON'S SOULS

Did the best Japanese game of the PS360 era just come out of nowhere?

words Nick Des Barres

I've written before in Play about the delight that comes from discovering a game—beginning an adventure knowing nothing, untainted by months of trailers, interviews and previews. Thanks to the completely under-the-radar Demon's Souls, I've just had my most rewarding first-time experience with a new game since the NES era. Even more exciting, Sony and From Software's dark action RPG may be the finest "next-gen" game yet produced in Japan.

What makes Demon's Souls so compelling is gameplay: Blistering, tough-as-nails, and serious as a heart attack. It's a completely unforgiving game, recalling the olden days of CRPGs like Wizardry and Ultima—death means death, cheating is impossible, and all that can be relied upon are your own wits. Demon's Souls wants to kill you, and doesn't hide the fact. In a darkly sardonic touch, the box art depicts a fallen hero, body crushed and broken, riddled with enemy arrows. That's you... dozens and dozens of times over.

Indeed, the game begins with death. After creating a character in classic pen-and-paper RPG style, you play a brief tutorial stage culminating in an encounter with a (defeatable!) boss that will almost certainly kill you in seconds. After dying, your soul is resurrected in the Nexus, an imponderable world-between-worlds. There's a backstory to all this—more the satisfying suggestion of a backstory, really, with just enough details to keep the world of Demon's Souls turning—but for the purposes of this review, we'll skip the setup. Once revived, you are tasked by an enigmatic Maiden in Black with defeating a demon, which she claims will allow you to regain a corporeal body.

During this first, linear part of the game, you learn the rudiments of the game's battle system: Two weapons can be equipped in each hand and switched with the D-pad, allowing for a highly customizable combat experience. A stealthy character, for example, might equip a dagger and small buckler as one set—a superior combination for close-quarters parrying and deadly backstabbing. The other set might consist of a bow and arrow and jugs of burning pitch for picking off enemies from afar, concealed in the shadows. A powerful melee fighter, on the other hand, might choose to equip a broadsword and heater shield for face-to-face fighting, or a wily mage may dual wield wands for simultaneous white and black magic. The choices are entirely up to how the player elects to develop his character, accomplished with the Souls received by defeating enemies. Acting as both experience and currency, Souls are used to upgrade and buy weapons, as well as selectively raise your stats one by one.

Upon conquering the initial dungeon and defeating your first demon, the game proper begins. You will regain a human body (though probably only briefly, more below), while the Nexus becomes a hub to five separate, sprawling, intricately designed worlds. They can be tackled in any order, returned to again and again, and eventually mastered... for mastery is the essence of Demon's Souls. Some time after opening up the greater

"In a darkly sardonic touch, the box art depicts a fallen hero, body crushed and broken, riddled with enemy arrows. That's you... dozens and dozens of times over."

world, the genius of the game's interlocking systems—far too deep and myriad to describe here—will come crashing together in a moment of epiphany. This is not simply a difficult twitch game; it's a game you must study, consider, and learn. Each death—and they will be manifold—brings with it new knowledge, whether it be about enemy patterns, elemental weaknesses, or the devious placement of traps. Each death is your fault; the game is eminently fair, and thus repeated "You Died" screens never become an aggravation. Instead, death represents an opportunity to try things a different and perhaps better way. There is no correct method of doing anything in Demon's Souls, and that's precisely why success in the game is so rewarding. Coming out of any given boss encounter alive brings with it a thrill of triumph you may not have felt since slaying Ganon as a preteen.

And what happens when you experience one of these countless deaths? There is no Game Over in Demon's Souls; instead, you lose your flesh-and-blood body and reincarnate within the Nexus as a spirit. In this form, HP is halved, but there are several options available to regain

corporeal shape. One is to defeat a boss—easier said than done in spirit form. Another is to allow your spirit to be "summoned" into another player's game on PSN, and help him defeat a boss. Yet another is to literally invade another player's game and kill him. Depending on what moral choices you and other players make online, your "tendency" will shift from white to black, radically altering the structure of the five worlds. While black, for instance, demons become much stronger, but item drops are better. While white, previously unreachable locations may become accessible. Demon's Souls is for the most part a one-player game, but it sports two other intriguing online features as well: The ability to leave short hint messages anywhere for other players to read, and bloodstains that appear where you die, allowing other players to see an in-game "movie" depicting the moment of your death... perhaps hinting at traps or challenges that might lie ahead.

Demon's Souls is an astonishing game, coming as it does from a country that seems to have lost all ambition to further the RPG genre. I credit it with nothing less than reviving my ardor for video games at a time when I was beginning to grow jaded and dispassionate. I could

"I credit Demon's Souls with nothing less than reviving my ardor for video games at a time when I was beginning to grow jaded and dispassionate."

continue for another ten thousand words about why I think it's the best PlayStation 3 game, but don't take my word for it: On the respected Japanese aggregate review site mk2, Demon's Souls holds the top slot—ahead of Oblivion, Little Big Planet, Metal Gear Solid 4 and Valkyria Chronicles. Despite this sensational acclaim, Sony has yet to announce the game for the West. Surprisingly, Asian and Korean versions of Demon's Souls have a complete (and quite decent) English translation embedded within them, playable on any PS3 worldwide. Although that makes it the perfect import game, I fervently hope Sony USA will realize what they have, and promote Demon's Souls as a flagship title on the level of an Uncharted or Resistance. It deserves no less.

parting shot

Punishingly difficult, incredibly dense, indescribably rewarding: Demon's Souls, an action RPG that will reassure you Japan's not out of the game yet.

Killing Floor

Let the bodies hit the floor

words Mike Griffin

Tripwire Interactive is a strong independent developer, having achieved impressive success with its first commercial release, Red Orchestra, a realistic WW2 shooter that has thrived on Valve's Steam service. When I discovered that Tripwire had purchased and assimilated Killing Floor and its team, with the intention of giving KF a complete make-over and proper commercial release, I had to know more. Refurbishing this excellent little mod under the steady guidance of the RO team, polishing Killing Floor's bloody and tactical 6-player co-op mutant slaying... well, visions of the next Left 4 Dead filled me with anticipation.

Let's back up to the part about Tripwire, the indie developer. Comparisons to Left 4 Dead come easily, but Killing Floor is not a big budget title like Valve's multi-million seller. Killing Floor is a smaller piece, focusing on co-op and solo fun, mayhem and slaughter. Tripwire has promised "recession-friendly" pricing for Killing Floor, set to include several maps across an infested UK landscape and a complete game-building SDK. We explored the guts of Killing Floor with Tripwire's President, John Gibson, and Vice President, Alan Wilson—key designers on the team.

Teams can hold up behind doors and weld them shut to briefly delay the mutant horde.

Interview

Alan Wilson,
Vice President
Tripwire Interactive

John Gibson,
President
Tripwire Interactive

play: Killing Floor is more grindhouse horror than big budget zombie epic. What kind of tension do you want to evoke in players as they navigate the darkness and gore?
John Gibson: Playing Killing Floor reminds me of how scared I got as a kid watching movies like the original *Night of the Living Dead*. KF tries to build up a palatable sense of dread by actually giving you time to get scared. While we do have some very fast moving Specimens that will sneak up on you and give you that in-your-face shock moment, we also have hordes of slow moving, shambling, classic zombie movie-style Specimens. Ammo is sparse and there is a very real possibility you could run out. No unlimited ammo here. There's no Gears of War or L4D-style "help me up" mechanic; if you go down, you're out until the wave ends. Many newer games seem to want to take away all chance of failure for the player, but what's the challenge in that? For us, a large portion of the fun is in knowing that you just might lose.
Alan Wilson: You always have a choice about what type of defense you want to use: hold up and try to kill everything in one spot, or keep running? Players can weld doors shut to try and channel the creatures, but it won't last for long. You can never be sure what Specimen types are coming at you, or quite where from. To complete a wave, teams have to kill everything and keep at least one of their own alive. It's that simple. The key location between waves is the Trader's shop: you definitely need to find her to re-arm, and time is limited. Trying to get to her while dealing with the worst enemies adds pressure. And if you don't get more ammo, you've got even heavier zombies to deal with in the next wave, with very limited ammo.

Are your levels stand alone, or linked together to form an overall campaign?
AW: The levels aren't linked into any grand campaign. KF isn't about the big storyline; it's driven by the fun of co-op play and the ability to level-up your character, go back in and kick more zombie ass. Every stage is deliberately very open, with dozens of variables to make sure you can replay the levels many, many times without getting stale.

Killing Floor's ascension from mod to full-blown commercial release could be compared to the likes of Day of Defeat and

Portal, both of which received a nice make over...
JG: There really is a stunning difference in visual quality from the mod to the commercial version. KF is built on an updated version of the engine we used for Red Orchestra, so we get to take advantage of some of the nice DX9 effects we added to the engine like bloom, motion blur, and color desaturation. We reworked all weapon, character and monster models from the ground up to a much higher level of quality. We've also gone through all the levels and polished up the visuals. It looks really nice, but it's certainly not Crysis. And honestly that wasn't our goal. We simply wanted to make a great looking game that was fun to play with your mates, and that could run on just about anyone's computer. Who isn't tired of having to upgrade their computer for every new game that comes out?

Six-player co-op is a blast. Does it pay for 6-man squads to split into smaller teams, or better to stay together?
JG: As much as possible, teams will want to stick together. Usually the best tactic is to try and find a nice defensible position to fight off the wave. Sometimes a player will start to get low on ammo and needs to venture out to try and scrounge some ammo or a new weapon. Going by yourself is a bad idea. It's best to go off searching in a group of no less than two players. Of course, different tactics are needed when fighting the boss Patriarch. If you're grouped together, one rocket from the Patriarch can take down your whole team. In this case, it's best to split up into two groups, with each group trading off slugging away at the Patriarch with rockets, shotguns, flamethrowers, etcetera—using classic hit and run tactics.

Sounds like weapon load-out will be very important in Killing Floor...
JG: What you find is that in the earlier waves, pistols, dual pistols, etcetera, are perfectly adequate for dealing with the threat. But as you get into the more difficult waves, you'll need to keep upgrading to better weapons. A flamethrower, for instance, is very effective at medium range for dealing with a huge horde of Specimens, but pretty terrible at close range, since you'll set yourself on fire. So you'll want to have a good mix of fast firing weapons like the Bullpup assault rifle, street sweepers like the shotguns, and then very powerful weapons like the flamethrower or rocket launcher.
Diversity is the key, otherwise you'll find your squad isn't well equipped to handle the wide range of threats the game will throw at them. The Siren is a good example of this: In addition to blurring your vision, her screams can detonate rockets and grenades in mid-air, rendering them effectively useless. Aside from being very creepy and unique, it fits her character's persona so well. She is bound in a straight jacket, and her only way to strike out at the world is this powerful scream. If your whole squad is equipped only with rocket launchers and grenades, she'll eat you for lunch—literally.

Are you awarded cash based on raw kills?
JG: Cash is doled out for killing Specimens. After all, that is what your riot squad is there to do: clean out the area! The bounty paid is different depending on just what exactly you kill. Players can also throw cash to each other; there's really no point in hogging excess cash when it's time to go shopping at the Trader. You want everyone seriously tooled up! Of course, the cash bounty paid, Perks earning, number of zombies, and a bunch of other factors are all scaled with the difficulty levels.

You're giving shooter fans a light RPG element with this cool Perk system. There are paths for Field Medic, Support Specialist, Sharpshooter, Commando, Berserker and Firebug. How will players raise and improve their Perks?
AW: The Perk system is keeping count of all sorts of stats about kills, weapon types you use, friends healed, and so on, all through play. Different stats and tendencies contribute to the earnings for different Perks. If you want Sharpshooter perks, then you'll have to focus on using the right weapons and hitting headshots, amongst other things—which really won't help you reach higher levels of the Medic Perks, obviously!

Can you become a master of all Perks?
AW: If a player can manage it, he can rise to the highest level in all the Perks, but we'd expect that to take *a lot* of gameplay. Each Perk has specific and very different effects. For instance, raising Medic Perks is going to make you much better at healing teammates. Syringes recharge faster, injections are more effective, and you're less vulnerable to Bloat bile. Very handy when combined with some of the more offensive perks, but probably not so hot if you're stuck on your own! The Support perk will speed up welding—and unwelding—of doors, as well as allowing that player to carry more weight. The Firebug Perk increases flamethrower range and damage, you're less vulnerable to fire, and grenades gain incendiary properties. Friends who play together are likely to find their own favorite combinations amongst their team. For strangers playing together, there is likely to be a quick debate about who will use what. Six Level-5 Berserkers all jumping on the same server could be a hoot! Massed chainsaws, anyone?

Cooperative online gaming is extremely popular now, but competitive gaming is also big. What are your long term plans for Killing Floor? People will want to play your monsters against players in Versus!
AW: Someone just had to say "Versus," didn't they? A teeny bit derivative, perhaps. But if people are interested in competitive KF, we've got a few ideas up our sleeve there too. There are all sorts of possibilities to expand the game types. Bounty Hunter mode, perhaps? Highest cash score wins? "That was *my* Bloat, you git!" Team vs. Team? Last Man Standing? "Shoot the Zombies, not me!" – "Nah, shooting you is more fun!" People who know us, know that we have spent a full 3 years putting out updates to RO. No reason why we won't do the same for Killing Floor.

"KF isn't about the big storyline; it's driven by the fun of co-op play and the ability to level-up your character."

Alan Wilson, Vice President
Tripwire Interactive

post-mortem | System: PC | Developer: Tale of Tales | Publisher: Tale of Tales | Multi: [illegible] | Available Now

The Path

Can you fall asleep in a dream?

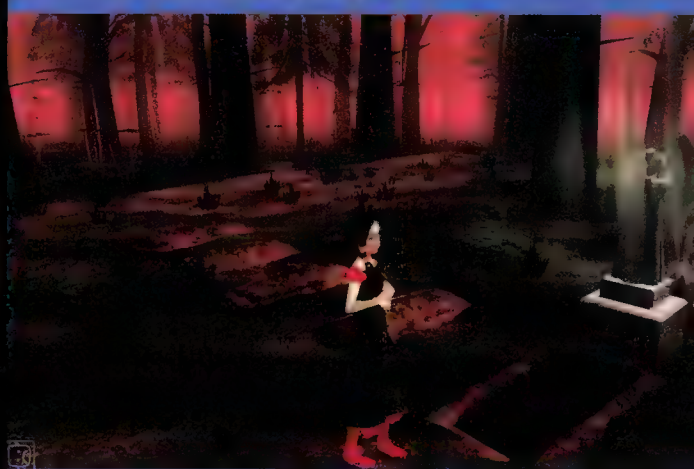
words Mike Griffin

I'll happily butt stomp, platform hop, wall-walk, lock-on, headshot, uppercut, slow-mo, combo, conform to QTEs, move troops, memorize boss patterns, and multitask a slew of stats, levels, ranks, quests, pets and powers. After 25+ years of gaming, I couldn't possibly reverse my taste for conventional game design precepts and complexity. And I've done all of the above in the games I played this month, but the experience that has lived inside me is The Path, a brilliant adventure horror game by Tale of Tales where you're not asked to do any of the above. While most games behave as taskmasters that tell you how to behave and react to action and narrative, desperate to hold on to you, The Path makes an effortless connection during its quest of interpretation.

It's a darker, more troubled Little Red Riding Hood. Often disturbing, and rarely—but beautifully—uplifting, The Path's greatest challenge is coming to terms with the empathy you'll feel for the characters as you guide them to their metaphoric ends. This is the story of the Red sisters, six girls living in a modern city, facing the fears of modern life, each given a basket to bring to Grandmother's house, which lies outside the city on the other side of a forest, down a long path. As each sister embarks through six chapters, they are told to stay on the path no matter what. What path you need to follow, you'll discover, isn't necessarily one that is straight and true to Grandmother's. Each sister must find their own wolf, and wolves often leave tracks (and revelations) in the depths of the woods.

If you've followed our recent indie coverage, you will recall another, smaller release from Tale of Tales (the Belgian team of Michael Samyn and Auriea Harvey) earlier this year called The Graveyard. Some of its themes and techniques have carried over to The Path. In your short time with each sister, much like your moments with the old woman in The Graveyard, you look deeply into their persona, conveyed through body language, sound, and brief observations of the world around them.

Young, hooded Robin, 9, is a beacon of innocence—still too childish to accept the



"Often disturbing, and rarely—but beautifully—uplifting."

ugliness in the world. Braided and sullen Rose, 11, is introverted but has a lot of love to give. Bare-footed Ginger, 13, brings her color and optimism to the world, reaching a euphoric denouement with her closest brethren. Goth girl Ruby, 15, appears strong and cynical, but fears adulthood. 17-year old Carmen, however, is growing up too fast for her own good. Finally there's Scarlet, 19, the firstborn—hurt by a mother that doesn't care. While The Path may appear to be a world of surreal fairy tale whimsy, its abstracted scenarios are as deep and dark as the forest itself, with heavy hints of themes like substance abuse, self-loathing, sexuality, and grief.

The action is simplified: walk, run and auto-interact (if you're close to an object of interest, you'll try to do something with it). The Path is not without its traditional game systems too. Light inventory, map, tracking of areas discovered and distance traveled, and 144 shiny flowers to collect through the chapters. I found myself hunting every last one of those shiny flowers with great urgency, anxious for some kind of closure, still acutely away of the protagonist's melancholy.

Your navigation of The Path will wind through a world of powerful imagery serving as narrative set pieces and metaphors. I won't spoil details here; all of these objects and entities are the formative ingredients in one's interpretation and enjoyment of the story Michael and Auriea have crafted, and that's important. I can, however, explore the lovely presentation of The Path. A very light spec that can run on most any PC, Tale of Tales has drawn a beautiful and surreal world by any technical measure, with outstanding use of color, saturation, filters, blur and film grain. The sisters show their personality in expressive animations, dressed in textures that are soft and detailed. The thick atmosphere is completed with an exotic soundtrack by Jarboe, rife with deep, pensive strings and haunting, effect-laden vocals.

I'm going to end with an excerpt from GDC 2009, where Tale of Tales was on hand to offer a fantastic stream-of-thought rant. Michael opened with an interesting question: **"When talking about independent games, we often wonder 'independent of what'?"**

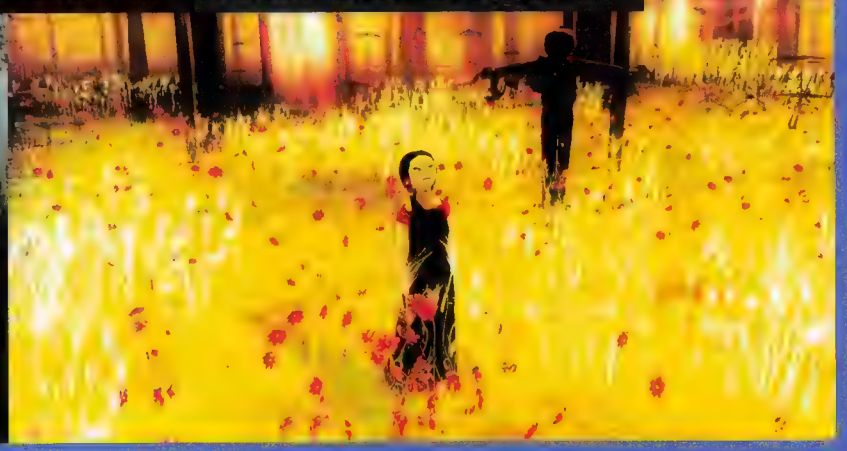
"**Auriea**: Independent of game publishers? **Michael**: Independent of game developers? **A**: Independent of quality time spent with your family? **M**: Quality time spent with your girlfriend? **A**: Or mistress! **M**: Quality time with your dog? **A**: Independent of parents! **M**: Independent of your girlfriend's financial situation? **A**: Your girlfriend's sexual situation? **M**: Independent of pleasure? **A**: Play? **M**: Addiction? **A**: Independent of art! **M**: Independent of conventional game design! **A**: Of rules? **M**: Goals? **A**: Challenges? **M**: Fire arms! **A**: Independent of Pac Man? **M**: Independent of Shigeru Miyamoto! **A**: Independent of Final Fantasy! **M**: Of journalists! **A**: Reviewers? **M**: And critics? **A**: Independent of internet solution providers! **M**: Independent of web 2.0! **A**: Independent of C++!

M: Independent of clothing? **A**: Of sleep? **M**: Of food? **A**: Razor blades? **M**: Internet memes? **A**: Independent of political ideologies? **M**: Of morality? **A**: Of money? **M**: Of success? **A**: Of language? **A**: Independent of street credibility! **M**: Friendship! **A**: Love? **M**: Independent of machines! **A**: Independent of SKUs! **M**: Of revenue shares! **A**: Of intelligence! **M**: Of stupidity! **A**: Independent of mortality? **M**: Of Jesus? **A**: Of God? **M**: Of Psychoanalysts! **A**: The subconscious? **M**: The übermensch!

A: Independent of operating system? **M**: Processor speeds? **A**: The exact number of buttons on a mouse? **M**: Independent of one's own prejudices! **A**: Of one's own limitations! **M**: Independent of the body! **A**: Of the soul! **M**: Of gravity! **A**: Independent of project management. **M**: Independent of object oriented programming! **A**: Independent of discussions about whether or not games are art!"

If they've given you a lot to think about, that's because this is what Tale of Tales does best: inspiring emotions of many hues. And if you're still not sure whether art and games can intersect in harmony, spend ten dollars on The Path and let the Red sisters change your mind.

"In your short time with each sister, you look deeply into their persona..."

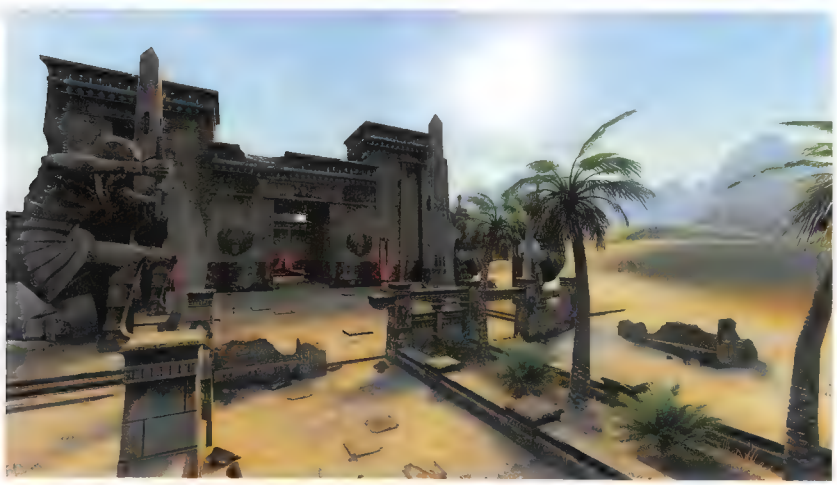


A thoughtful Rose in a flower patch.

WAR rages on in the Land of the Dead

A week of carnage is nothing new to Warhammer Online fans. If you're playing the game as intended, Realm vs. Realm battles become the centerpiece of your efforts to push the Order and Destruction agendas, seize control of world regions, and earn the lovely golden loot bags we all crave. From around mid-April onward, however, players from both sides will be entrenched in an unprecedented week-long race for resources during the Beyond the Sands event, a prelude to the huge Land of the Dead live expansion that Mythic is rolling out by early summer. With a steady stream of new classes and events like the recent addition of the Slayer and Choppa and the ongoing Call to Arms story arc, WAR subscribers continue to get their money's worth.

Mythic has prepared a host of events leading up to the opening of the Land of the Dead. During that first phase of the event, as the storyline goes, the Order lines are secretly infiltrated by Destruction agents. The thieves come away with Dwarven plans for airship construction. Both sides have detected the rising of the Tomb Kings in the forsaken Land of the Dead, far south of the Marshes of Madness in previously undiscovered world map terrain, beyond impassable mountains. Both factions engage



in a race to begin mass construction of airships to reach the Land of the Dead, where countless ancient tokens of power can be gathered, and where the Casket of Souls beckons. Suddenly kills, keep sieges and region control will take on a whole new meaning, as every victory earns resources that funnel into the airship expedition effort.

Throughout the unlock race, you'll see the Warhammer Online world changing: New landmarks, airships visible in the capital cities and southern skies, and more dramatic additions, like a new Public Quest where a shoddily-built Orc air vessel crash lands in the midst of the PQ, visible to all nearby players. At the end of these initial events, the side with the most resources earns a supreme reward: unfettered access to the Land of the Dead for 24 hours. LotD is sort of like a Twilight Zone of adventure and loot, completely disconnected from the RVR struggle in the main world. It's a sprawling outdoor zone with several Public Quests and events, as well as gateways to a handful of huge instanced dungeons called Lairs.

Each side will have Expedition Camps in the Land of the Dead with airship docks, vendors, trainers and new quest givers (with rewards like cloaks, new armor sets and unique trophies). These NPCs are after Tokens, the currency of progression in LotD, earned through quests and Lairs. There's another big unlock for players in LotD: the gigantic Temple of the Vulture Lord. This will be one of the pinnacles of progression in the new content and an absolute feast for passionate dungeon crawlers. The central area of the temple is a massive zone with multiple wings, traps, micro-events, bosses and some really amazing loot.

What happens when both factions have access to the Land of the Dead? Does everyone just duck into instance dungeons and play possum? Negative. This is the big hook, first attempted in Mythic's Dark Age of Camelot: Darkness Falls. Naturally opposing forces can clash in the open world, but you can also engage the enemy in the new Lairs and pyramid areas. Zone in, and your warband will be matched to an instance already populated by a party from the opposing team. You want to crawl that dungeon and secure the best treasure? You'll have to earn it!

Players will actually get Purge quests from their Expedition Camps that reward you for mercilessly eradicating enemy players in the dungeons and deeper Tombs Kings content. With traps, barriers, and other tactical opportunities, smart teams will leave obstacles in their wake to delay intruders as they pass key checkpoints and sub-bosses. These contended instanced dungeons will feature dynamic scaling, so as party members (or enemies) zone in, monster difficulty and spawn type will dynamically recalibrate. Given this ever-present game of survival, the faction that earns brief, but exclusive access to the Land of the Dead will have to develop quick-moving strategies to take advantage of the window.

Ideal for character ranks 28 to 40, the Land of the Dead content represents another positive step for Warhammer Online. Players will also find some significant alterations to the Marauder, Shaman, White Lion and Archmage careers in the forthcoming 1.21 and 1.3 patches, and smaller tweaks for all 24 playable careers. It's time to slay some undead lords.

NPD GROUP

PC DATABASE

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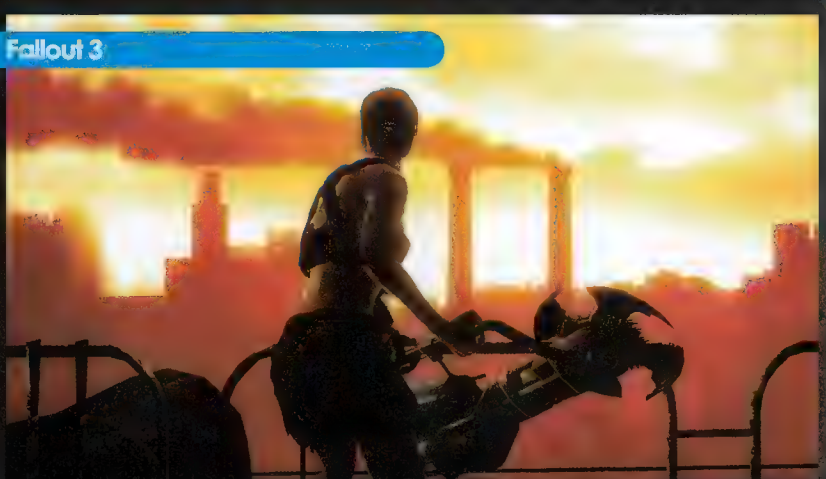
Top-Selling PC Titles For February 2009

01	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	Blizzard
02	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	Electronic Arts
03	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II	Relic/THQ
04	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Blizzard
05	F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin	Monolith/Warner Bros. Interactive
06	Spore	Electronic Arts
07	World of Warcraft	Blizzard
08	The Sims 2: Apartment Life Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
09	Fallout 3	Bethesda Softworks
10	World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade	Blizzard

F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin



Fallout 3

What SSD is good for ME?

Solid State Drives are becoming all the rage...everyone wants to get on the bandwagon! Problem is, should you go for the highest end on the market, or are there better options to fit your budget? Problem solved! OCZ offers a trifecta of performance options with their SSD lineup, to cater to each tier of gamers, enthusiasts, professionals, and students looking to take advantage of the latest technology...and not necessarily at an outrageous cost. When it comes to making the best choice for a system upgrade, you'll see the most noticeable difference when switching from that tired old hard drive to an SSD...so match the one that's best for you!

Solid Series for Early Adopters and Budget Conscious

Starving Student? Casual laptop user? Then the OCZ Solid Series is right up your thin-wallet alley! Perfect for those looking to get all the advantages of fast seek and access times, the Solid Series offers read and write speeds that absolutely excel over your typical hard drive. Use a laptop for class or on the road? The Solid Series is an excellent upgrade to keep your notebook lightweight, quiet and cool, all while extending battery life. The best part is you can have all the performance over hard drives at low cost per gigabyte...snag a 30GB Solid Series for under $100 and be on your way to SSD heaven!

Apex Series for Mainstream Gamers and System Builders

Don't be afraid to make the jump to SSDs for your gaming or overclocking needs! The Apex Series offers a dual-controller design with built-in RAID 0 architecture that surpasses any hard drive on the market, as well as the extra performance boost over more entry-level SSDs. Gamers will appreciate the incredible load times and fast response of the hottest titles, while system builders can enjoy configuring a powerful desktop or laptop with ultra-snappy performance. Get ready to rumble in up to 250GB capacities by making the Apex Series your main drive—and prepare to be impressed!

Vertex Series for Discerning Professionals and Elite Enthusiasts

Does your business or profession depend on your system running on all cylinders at all times? If you're the type with multiple professional applications running simultaneously, the Vertex Series can handle anything you throw at it! Not only does it blow all traditional hard drives and most other SSDs out of the water with the fastest read, write, and seek times, but the sophisticated architecture with 64MB onboard cache ensures you will experience top-notch performance in all computing environments. From mutimedia and games to graphics and video processing, the Vertex Series is the pinnacle of what SSDs should strive to be. If you want the best and are prepared to pay the premium, the Vertex Series is waiting for you.

Released By: FUNimation | **Volume:** 2 | **Rating:** Mature | **Running Time:** 100 mins | **Available:** March 24

Baccano

This train is a mess!

"Unconventional narrative structure, boundless energy, and a huge cast of characters."

words Bill Gray

train is the central
ause locomotives are es-
inkansen from Osaka to
Tokyo, and
ke you straight there—no surprises, twists, turns, or backtracking. Baccano!, on the other hand, remains anything but linear in this second volume, jumping from character to character and era to era in a thoroughly un-train-like fashion. But the series' center of gravity revolves around the Flying Pussyfoot, the locomotive carrying most of the story's main players.

And though I *still* haven't figured out exactly what that story is about, this second volume of Baccano! provides some satisfying clues—clues that I won't spoil for you, don't worry. Through character backstory and flashbacks waaaaay in the past, the motivations and vendettas of the main players start to round into shape, from Ladd's cheerful homicidal tendencies to Jacuzzi's hidden strength to the shadowy conspiracies providing the fuel for the hurtling cannonball that is Baccano!. And all the
racters, it's becoming clear, have ended up on this
e train somehow, where they bounce off each other
e super balls.

Thankfully, even though the story's starting to make
nse, it hasn't slowed down the whizz-bang pacing of
ne series one bit. People rush to and fro, kidnapping,
htin
nd double-crossing each other at every
zi and his gang are hot on the heels of an
legend known only as the "Rail Tracer," which supposedly murders people on trains one by one. The feud between the Gandor and Russ
ilies heats up, while the search for Dallas Genoard
sifies. Only Isaac and Miria, my favorite clueles
es, remain immune to the pressure. The two of them provide timely comic relief at the end of every episode in the "what's next" segment voiceover. And, they continue to figure in the main story—the episode where they bring some laughs to other characters stuck in some difficult situations may be the best one yet in the series—funny, packed with action, and even at times poignant.

FUNimation's choosing to release Baccano! in the more typical four-episodes to a DVD format, like they did with Tsubasa, Darker Than Black, and Claymore, rather than the thinpak box sets they used with Negima!? and School Rumble. Normally I'm not a fan of stringing out the releases, but in Baccano!'s case, I don't mind as much—it's good enough to justify the additional time and expense of collecting it. The animation remains flawless and fluid, and the bouncy, period-themed score complements the action beautifully, along with one of the best opening themes since the great Tank! from Cowboy Bebop. The dub remains a sticking point, only because it's essential to know which characters are which—otherwise, you won't stand a chance of understanding what's going on—but it's less of an issue now that we're four episodes into the series. All in all, its unconventional narrative structure, boundless energy, and huge cast of characters make Baccano! a fascinating, highly entertaining trip.

parting shot

Time to get your ticket punched for the second leg of the journey, folks. Baccano!'s picking up steam, and it's shaping up to be a hell of a ride.

manga review | **Released By:** Del Rey | **Vol:** 1 | **Rating:** 16+ | **Avail:** March 24 2009

Samurai 7

Lucky Number 7

Film buffs might already be aware of *The Seven Samurai*, a famous and influential Japanese film made in the 1950s. It even got remade into the American Western *The Magnificent Seven,* which starred cowboys instead of samurai. There was also an anime adaptation called *Samurai 7*, on which this manga is based. The premise remains the same: seven pure-hearted individuals must stand up and fight against the bad guys and save a helpless village. But in this manga one of the individuals is a cyborg, and the whole story goes sci-fi and mecha.

The heroes are still samurai, only now they're samurai from the future. Fans of samurai and sci-fi take heed: this ought to be the perfect match for you. It can also be a fun read for fans of the Japanese film that started it all, because they can see how the story changes — yet stays the same — no matter how it's reworked. All of the retellings are bound to show what a popular story this is and how, like the samurai, we can never fully forget it. **Danica Davidson**

parting shot

Read it if: You like cyborg samurai or the original movie.

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manga review | **Released By:** VIZ | **Vol:** 1 | **Authors:** Naoki Urasawa & Osamu Tezuka | **Avail:** Mar 11, 2009

Pluto Viz Signature Edition, Vol. 1

Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto

Take a look at those two authors in that little info box. Osamu Tezuka—the godfather of manga, the man responsible for Black Jack, Kimba the White Lion, and especially Astro Boy. Naoki Urasawa—his spiritual successor, whose Monster is a masterpiece of action, psychological drama, and moral complexity. Urasawa has taken Tezuka's original Astro Boy concept and re-imagined it into *Pluto*, and the results are nothing short of spectacular.

Pluto re-tells Tezuka's original first Astro Boy story, The Greatest Robot on Earth, from the perspective of Gesicht, a minor character in the original story, who has been given top billing in Pluto. Gesicht has been called in to investigate the death of Mont Blanc, one of the most famous and helpful robots of all time. Mont Blanc's head, however was intact, though something attached antlers to it, a mysterious symbol. Gesicht's investigations take him to the other most powerful robots in the world in an attempt to discover the killer and his motivations before it's too late.

Urasawa's at his best when he has the opportunity to tell episodic, almost mini-stories that explore the psyche of the characters, and Pluto has no shortage of introspection and musings on the nature of what it means to be a human and/or a robot. These philosophical moments don't detract from the story; rather, they help provide some breathing space and counterpoint to the main murder mystery story. And Tezuka's Astro Boy world of robots and humans coexisting provides the perfect backdrop for the main action of the plot.

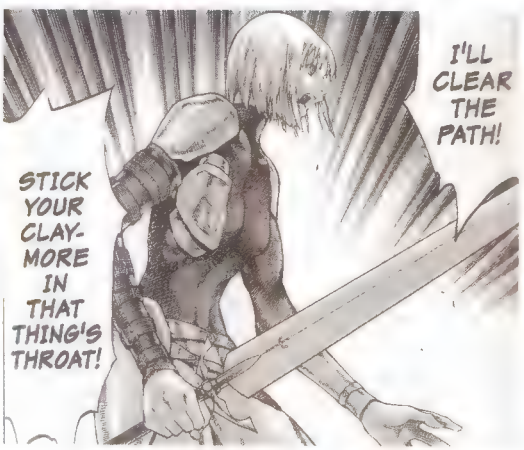
Viz' signature edition retains some color pages, as well as being printed on higher quality paper and coming loaded with production notes and interviews. Every manga fan should own a copy of Pluto, and the signature edition's the best one out there to collect. What are you waiting for? **Bill Gray**

Released By: VIZ Media (Manga), FUNimation (Anime) | **Manga Vol:** 9 | **Anime Vol:** 4 | **Rating:** T+/TV MA | **Avail:** Now | manga review

Claymore The Rumors of War, Vol. 4

Theater of pain

The three acts of "The Witch's Maw" that occupy the first 72 minutes of the 96-minute 4th Volume in the Claymore anime series were so especially good, yet so agonizing, I turned to the manga to see if it was any easier to digest. To give you an idea of what I'm referring to, Claymore is about a group of women who at a young age turn their lives over to an organization that taints their blood with that of the Yoma—monsters who dwell unnoticed inside a human host until such a time they decide to transform and eat whatever human is unlucky enough to be on the menu. Once tainted with Yoma blood, these young girls train their entire lives to protect humans that mostly besmirch them, until a Yoma comes to town and starts devouring them like meaty people fries. The sad truth is that the more a Claymore uses her Yoma power the closer she comes to losing her humanity and becoming more Yoma than human, in which case her closest ally is summoned to give her a beautiful death. But that's not the half of it. Claymores can also re-grow limbs, tissue and organs—some better than others, which leads to a lot of dismemberment and worse. Lately the Claymore central to the main storyline, Clare, has been fighting "Enlightened Beings," gigantic, sadistic, nearly indestructible Yoma; some of which were once Claymores. In this particular volume, which runs parallel to volume 9 of the manga, Clare and two powerful Claymore allies go up against a pair of indescribably foul beings that will go to any lengths to push them beyond their threshold in order to turn them into Yoma to fight along their side...for three whole episodes. About the manga: it's beautifully done and shows how faithful the anime is at the same time. It's also nice to flip the page when a scene is too nasty, and the detail in the manga can't be beat. Otherwise the anime delivers the obvious: animation, audio, inflection... Conclusion? From now on I have to own both. **Dave Halverson**

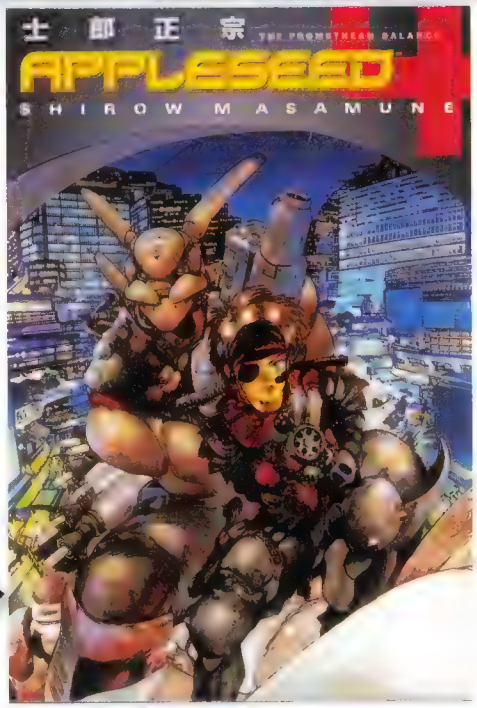


"Claymores can also re-grow limbs, tissue and organs—some better than others..."

manga review | **Released By:** Dark Horse | **Volume:** 4 | **Author:** Shirow Masamune | **Pages:** 216 | **Available:** March 11, 2009

Appleseed: The Promethean Balance

The Last Bite of the Apple



Deunan's back—and this time she's sporting a jaunty eye-patch! Dark Horse has finally released *Appleseed 4: The Promethean Balance*, the final book in the Appleseed trade paper-back series published waaaaaay back in 1989 in Japan. All I can say is, it's about time.

The *Promethean Balance* may be the best of the four books, and it certainly showcases Masamune as both a storyteller and a manga artist. Centered around a terrorist plot to disrupt an important negotiation taking place in Olympus, the story feels oddly timely, despite the original publication date in Japan. After a training exercise (where an eye injury forces Duenan to don the patch), Deunan and Briareos and the rest of the ESWAT crew have to penetrate the layers of misdirection surrounding the planned attack, including bombs, diplomats, and one giant landmate. The clock is ticking!

The story certainly flows along much better in this volume while still having the same twists and clever little asides I've come to expect from a Shirow work. It also takes me back to the dense, fully-realized world of bioroids and landmates. At this point, coming back to *Appleseed* is like coming home for me—familiar, safe and reliable. With Deunan and Bri, I can always count on enjoying a complex, well-plotted storyline that doesn't insult my intelligence, and artwork that blows my mind with its intricate detail and design. Now, if only Shirow could be coerced into authoring a volume 5... **Bill Gray**

> "The Promethean Balance may be the best of the four books..."

parting shot

The Appleseed TPBs finish strong with The Promethean Balance...now give us a fifth volume already!

WHAT LIES IN THE FURTHEST REACHES OF THE SKY?
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Year of the Hero:

Gamania Digital Entertainment goes Global with "Hero: 108"

gamania

MoonScoop

HERO: 108

Ever dream of developing and publishing your own MMOG, owning the world's largest collection of Spawn action figures and running across the Arctic Circle just to prove you can? Umm… sorry. Albert Liu, president of the Taipei-based publisher, Gamania Digital Entertainment, already has your game on.

Founded in 1995, purely on the success of Liu's own game called Convenience Store, Gamania has grown to be the most successful publisher of MMOGs in Asia. With support offices in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and mainland China, Gamania addicts are consistently fed top titles like NCSoft's decade-running Lineage, Wizet's casual MMOG Maple Story, and the anime stylings of DevCat's Mabinogi.

On a typical day, during any given hour, at the high-rise offices of Gamania, almost a half million users join forces to flood the company's servers with gameplay. Entire floors are dedicated to the smooth operation of single titles. Yet, to keep costumers even happier, Gamania has an open-to-the-public service office where users can retrieve credits for the occasional stolen sword or find out, in-person, when a new level might launch.

And speaking of "launch," this is a big year for Liu. You might call it the "Year of Heroes." Liu, who is something of a heroic icon for his 1,000-strong workforce, is launching the highly anticipated casual MMOG, Hero: 108. Based on the creation of in-house artist Phoenix Tarng, this action/comedy concept sold as a television series to the Emmy-winning animation house Mike Young Productions. Under the caring wings of this Los Angeles-based producer, the concept was picked up by Cartoon Network and will launch this year on the station's U.S. channel and worldwide in 2010. Also this year, Liu is taking his company global, by launching the "Hero:108" casual MMOG in the States and Europe.

The story of a war between humans and animals in a Hidden Kingdom in China, *Hero: 108* (the game and the TV series) follows the zany yet epic adventures of First Squad, the dynamic force that tries to bring peace to the land. Unexpectedly, animals are tough customers in

"Hero: 108 (the game and the TV series) follows the zany yet epic adventures of First Squad..."

OOF!
Animals can smell fear.
Yeah? Well smell this!
A cunning plan means success in battle.
Take this for a plan — rotten animals!
Hmmm... It seems they have found their internal heat.
Enough little friends. You are uncommonly brave.
OOF, again!
OUCH!
Those animals are going down!
Leave the rest to me.

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HERO: 108 水火外傳 ORIGINS

"Liu almost hates to mention the fact that his stockpile of Gundam Mobile Suits is near complete as well."

Everyone needs some bunny to love

this world and even when beat, refuse to surrender, challenging the heroes to such outrageous games as jump rope (think jump ropes that spin so fast they form force fields) and bowling (with manic penguins that turn their own bodies into mean-looking pens that won't take "knock-down" for an answer).

Opening new offices in California in 2009 and hitting the ground running with a massive new game would turn most people into a pile of mush. But then, Liu isn't one for rest. He loves his job, his company and extreme challenges. Here's a quick interview with a guy who really did cover 650 km to reach the Arctic Circle in 21 days. (Oh, and as far as beating you out for the best Spawn collection goes, Liu almost hates to mention the fact that his stockpile of Gundam Mobile Suits is near complete as well.)

play: How did you come up with the idea for Convenience Store?

Lui: I discovered gaming during my first year in high school with Super Mario Brothers. It really sparked my passion for games. From that time on, I was determined to build my own game company. The creation of Convenience Store—which really is what it sounds like; shopping in a store like a 7-Eleven—was sort of a reverse-engineering project. Casual games for female players were almost non-existent back then. So, I decided to make a game that was simple and fun to play with cute characters. And, suddenly, we'd opened up a whole new market for gaming. We sold about 1.2 million copies which broke a record. A best-seller in Asia back then was about one hundred thousand copies.

Is there a difference between the attitudes of gamers in Asia and the U.S.?

Before the boom of online games, we did not have many gamers in Asia. Most of Asian online game players were converted from Internet surfers, so we're used to an Internet interface. U.S. online gamers seem to mostly come to online MMOG's from PC platform games. U.S. gamers are more literate in hard-core games as well as complicated game play and controls. But I am convinced Asian and U.S. players will become less different as the industry grows. In the next few years, I think there are going to be more hard core gamers in Asia and, in the U.S., more gamers interested in intuitive, simple game play.

Do you have a favorite Hero:108 character?

My favorite hero is Lin-Chung. He is, of course, the biggest hero in the story. Everyone dreams of being the true hero of heroes. And, the cool thing is, in the world of online gaming, it's possible to achieve that dream.

Pinocchio 70th Anniversary Platinum Edition

Studio: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

If feature animation was in its infancy when Walt Disney produced Snow White in 1936, it gained a beautifully wobbly pair of legs by the time he finished Pinocchio, a breathtaking and triumphant work of art that has never looked better thanks to the remastering job on this unbelievably clear and beautiful new Blu-ray. Notwithstanding Gepetto's questionable parenting skills, the story is a wonderful fairy tale that will never fail to enrapture – and probably also terrify – kids of all ages, thanks to Pinocchio's increasingly exciting and visually stunning adventures. Meanwhile, the Blu-ray features storyboards, deleted scenes, commentaries and much more, making this iconic little marionette a real, live classic. If you need a reason to upgrade to high-definition, this is as good as any. **Todd Gilchrist**

Experiments in Terror 3

Studio: Provocateur

The third volume in the consistently entertaining *Experiments in Terror* DVD series (now released through curator Noel Lawrence's own Provocateur Pictures label) offers another collection of horror-themed shorts from the underground cinema scene. The seven films featured on Volume 3 are largely culled from modern directors, including Guy Maddin and Marie Losier's Silent Era-tribute to birth trauma, *Manuelle Labor*, a harrowing excerpt from Jason Bognacki's bloody psycho-drama *The Red Door*, and the mysterious J.X. Williams' *Satan Claus*, which puts a malevolent spin on footage from a bizarre Mexican holiday movie. The lone nod to the past is 1961's *Born of the Wind*, a wonderfully lurid potboiler about obsessive love and blood-drinking mummies from the legendary Mike Kuchar (*Sins of the Fleshapoids*). Genre fans bemoaning the current mainstream and indie product will undoubtedly be cheered by the genuinely impressive scope of vision presented here. **Paul Gaita**

Batman Movie Anthology

Studio: Warner Home Video

The *Batman Movie Anthology* shows comic-book fans where contemporary adaptations of their heroes first came from, and just how far they've traveled. Featuring extensive documentaries and featurettes, this set includes everything there is to know about the first four adventures, including the fact that Joel Schumacher is sorry for the last two. But while the supplements are candid and unquestionably fascinating to comic fans, they don't especially enhance the films themselves, which haven't aged well. But as Bat fans know, sometimes the things we need are not the things we deserve, which is why this is as essential as it is uninspiring.

Tim Burton's two *Batman* movies were stylized, exaggerated spectacles that confirmed the arrival of a new kind of mythology on the silver screen; while Joel Schumacher's installments virtually undid all of Burton's work legitimizing the genre, they remain vaguely necessary as cautionary tale. **Todd Gilchrist**

Vanishing Point

Studio: Fox Home Entertainment

Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* is not just a terrific car movie. Nor is it just a bullet point in Tarantino's blitz of *Death Proof* references. Rather, it's an epic chase, a meditative drama, a time capsule of early '70s restlessness, and a tribute to all of the folks for whom freedom exists at the meeting point between rubber and the open road. Fox's new Blu-ray maximizes the emerging format with a glut of extras, including commentaries, interviews, featurettes, and an interactive dashboard that provides fuel, speed and soundtrack information. If you don't have the time, muscle car or legal team to get yourself on the road, outrunning the cops and crossing state lines with the wind in your hair, then *Vanishing Point* is the next best thing. **Todd Gilchrist**

Let The Right One In

Studio: Magnolia Entertainment

Let the Right One In is an unsettling supernatural thriller from Sweden about a tormented pre-teen (Kåre Hedebrant) who discovers a kindred spirit in a mysterious new neighbor, Eli (Lina Leandersson), who may or may not be a vampire. Tomas Alfredson's feature, based on the best-seller by John Ajvide Lindqvist, eschews the popular vampire-as-hipster-libertine scenario in favor of a quieter, metaphysical take that's closer in tone to George Romero's *Martin* than *30 Days of Night* or *Twilight*. The film's snowbound setting does much to underscore its at-times suffocating atmosphere; the DVD includes several minor deleted scenes and a featurette on Sweden in the 1980s, which is when the film is set. **Paul Gaita**

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The 3D Revolution Is Coming Home

And it's closer than you think...

words John Gaudiosi

From the very early days of gaming, shareware titles like Castle Wolfenstein and Doom attempted to re-create the reality of our everyday 3D experience. One of the key selling points of Sony's original PlayStation was its introduction of 3D gaming to consoles with titles like Tomb Raider and Resident Evil. Today, the in-game 3D experience continues to be pushed further with current generation consoles and PC games. The visuals continue to get more crisp and lifelike, and the recreation of living, breathing virtual worlds become more robust—but there's still the screen that serves as the portal, and in some ways, the obstacle, of true immersion.

This year, as Hollywood, sports leagues like the NBA, and television networks all experiment with new—and sometimes old (Anaglyph)— forms of 3D technology, videogames are finally making the true leap to the third dimension. At the Consumer Electronics Show in January, Nvidia shipped its new GeForce Vision stereoscopic 3D graphics cards and kit for PC gamers. This technology came backwards compatible with over 350 games, turning old 2D experiences into something new and fresh. This technology, which works with both 3D monitors and televisions, will also turn the latest 3D Blu-ray Disc movies into 3D.

While PC gamers have been the focus of 3D gaming thus far, new technology from Blitz Games Studios promises to usher in 3D gaming for consoles like PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. They showcased new BlitzTech 3D tech at GDC in March. Ubisoft is working on its own proprietary 3D technology for consoles that will debut this fall with its game adaptation of James Cameron's Avatar. And Disney Interactive Studios will bring 3D to the Wii this fall with Disney/Pixar's Toy Story Mania!, an Anaglyph adaptation of the 4D theme park experience from Disneyland and Walt Disney World. This is likely just the tip of the proverbial iceberg of new technology, as 3D has captured the imagination of Hollywood creatives and movie-going audiences alike. This latest wave of 3D infiltration is shaping up to be anything but another fad.

"According to our latest statistics, there are well over 50 million gamers in the U.S.," says David Naranjo, director of product development, Mitsubishi Digital Electronics America.

Inside the Rim

Vince Pace, founder of PACE Technologies, worked with Cameron to create the 3D underwater cameras that were used for the 3D IMAX documentary about the Titanic shipwreck, Ghost of the Abyss. Pace also collaborated with Cameron on his latest endeavor, the 20th Century Fox 3D film, Avatar, before moving on to film Disney's 3D TRON sequel, TR2N, currently in production. The PACE 3D technology is unique because the cameras' focus and convergence is managed by a convergence operator. This manages the depth of field and makes the 3D experience very natural to the human eyes and eliminates fatigue.

"You can sit and watch a 3D experience for two to three hours without eye fatigue," says Steve Hellmuth, executive vice president of Operations and Technology for the NBA. "What you traditionally had with past 3D technology was a radical foreground that could cause viewers to get motion sickness. Now with this technology, viewers can watch a three-hour NBA All-Star Game and feel like they're in the arena."

The NBA has been at the forefront of experimenting with new 3D HD technology in theaters. The 24th annual NBA All-Star Saturday Night in Phoenix was transmitted live in 3D HD to 160 screens in Carmike Cinemas, Celebration Cinemas, Cinema West, Emagine, Galaxy Theatres, Marquee Cinemas, MJR, NCG, Rave Motion Pictures, Showcase and UltraStar Cinema locations across 35 states using this PACE technology. Earlier this year in Las Vegas, the NCAA Football BCS National Championship Game was broadcast in 3D HD at The Palms Casino Landmark Theater to a packed crowd.

The NBA featured the first live sports event in 3D HD with special viewing parties for NBA All-Star 2007. For Game 2 of The NBA Finals in 2007, at the direction of the Cleveland Cavaliers, the NBA delivered the first public viewing of a live sporting event in 3D HD when more than 14,000 fans in the Quicken Loans Arena watched the Cavaliers take on the San Antonio Spurs on four 60-foot screens. Last season, the Dallas Mavericks produced and delivered the first live 3D HD sporting event to a motion picture theater at the Landmark Theater in Dallas to 500 fans.

"I think that every subject matter is a candidate for 3D," says Pace. "If a fan enjoys the visual experience of watching it, then that translates into a 3D experience. However I started out underwater and a lot of people look at underwater images and just go, 'Wow look how incredible that medium is.' There are natural subjects that translate to 3D very easily and I think basketball is one of them. You are close to the action, it has a defining shape and structure and you already feel close to it. It is not a challenge for me. I bet some other sports will be a little more of a challenge."

Pace compared the jump to 3D in sports to the introduction of sports to 2D through the television. Some sports, like boxing, will be natural for 3D. Others, like hockey, will be more of a challenge.

"Boxing was probably the easiest sport to cover in 2D because it was there, contained in a ring, and you put a few cameras in and you've got it," continues Pace. "But it's not about that. It's about what's the most visceral experience you can get."

Hollywood Goes All-In with 3D

Over the past several years, a quiet revolution has been going on at major multiplexes across the country. After seeing the success of 3D

feature films like *Beowulf, The Nightmare Before Christmas, Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *The Polar Express* at IMAX theaters, major theater chains started upgrading their projectors to 3D. In part, this transition was the result of more elaborate home theater set-ups at home, where former theater patrons were spending more time watching Blu-ray movies. But Hollywood visionaries, including James Cameron, George Lucas, John Lassiter and Jeffrey Katzenberg, were also busy ramping up new 3D spectacles to entice viewers back into theaters.

"It looks like the audiences are voting for 3D with their dollars," says Andrew Oliver, chief technology officer and co-founder of Blitz Games Studios, whose recent works include House of the Dead: Overkill. "For example, the 3D version of Coraline took in six times the amount of money that the 2D version did per screen. There's been huge success with the 3D versions of Bolt and Hannah Montana. And Disney/Pixar and DreamWorks Animation recently announced that all their upcoming films will be in 3D."

This year will see an unprecedented number of 3D movie releases covering every genre from kid flicks like *Up!* and *G-Force* to horror movies like *My Bloody Valentine 3D* and *Final Destination: Death Trip 3D* to science fiction features like Cameron's *Avatar*. And that's just the beginning of what is sure to become a new genre of 3D movies in theaters (see sidebar). Unlike the 1950s fad of Anaglyph 3D (those red and blue glasses that were recently used for the Super Bowl ads for DreamWorks 3D movie Monsters vs. Aliens), this new wave of 3D technology has been created to expand the movie viewing experience rather than provide cheap thrills or gimmicks.

"I think what you are seeing is an improvement in entertainment in general," explains Pace. "Whether you look at Avatar as a dramatic feature or a Hi-Fi film, the story line is going to be complemented by the effect of 3D, whether it makes it more real or more emotional. I think that the technology is really trying to be complementary to a good production overall. In the case of Avatar, you have a good story, a visionary director and new 3D technology."

Many of the challenges that Pace and other pioneers in new 3D technology are confronting today with sports, movies and concert films will also be felt by game developers as they tackle the third dimension. While shooters seem made for true 3D, other genres, like real-time strategy games, may take some work.

The Home Invasion

After an exasperatingly long and tumultuous battle between HD-DVD and Blu-ray Disc, the home entertainment industry has learned its lesson when it comes to new technology.

Hellmuth said that HP is working with both Walt Disney Pictures Home Entertainment and Sony Pictures Home Entertainment to find a new 3D standard for Blu-ray Disc.

"The first thing they will see are 3D Blu-ray Discs for the home for hobbyists and for people who have kids," says Hellmuth. Those four, five and six year-olds that are now used to seeing animated films in 3D will start demanding it at home. We anticipate making an NBA Blue-ray disc of highlights of all the stuff we have done in 3D. I think the 3D Blu-rays are about six or seven months out."

As more Hollywood studios churn out 3D movies, a library will be built for cable and satellite providers to get into the 3D business. Hellmuth said both Comcast and DirecTV have been in contact with the NBA about 3D content, although talks are very early at this stage. Pace believes the matriculation of 3D from theater to living room will occur a lot sooner than some people think. In fact, he sees the leap to 3D following the same path as 2D technologies like the jump to HD.

"Most people think it is just going to be in theaters or in the home, but we have certainly seen all the indicators that it will parallel what has worked in the past for 2D and just elevate that experience," says Pace. "You will see it in demand on Blu-ray and DVD, in television sales, and through broadcast."

Mitsubishi, which was one of the first companies to introduce 3D Ready TVs to the market place in 2007, already has 2 million DLP TVs in homes today that support 3D technology. The price range for these TVs range from $1,500 to $3,800. Mitsubishi has partnered with NVIDIA to showcase its GeForce Vision stereoscopic 3D technology at retail.

"According to our latest statistics, there are well over 50 million gamers in the U.S.," says David Naranjo, director of product development, Mitsubishi Digital Electronics America. "Of those gamers, 25 percent have expressed a high degree of interest in DLPs. We foresee gaming being the first content for 3D in the home via the PC, with 3D movies soon afterward (through pre-packaged media, or digital distribution) and then the natural progression to broadcast, cable and satellite."

Other manufacturers like ViewSonic, Samsung, iz3D, Zalman and Hyundai have 3D TVs and monitors in stores. Sony has committed to have 3D LCDs at retail by the end of next year. And others are likely to follow as more content is released to support 3D.

"Similar to the transition to HD TV, content will help accelerate the adoption of the technology in the home," says Naranjo. "There has been a renewed interest in 3D not only from the gaming side but also from the Hollywood side. Many producers and directors have publicly announced that their movies will only be mastered for 3D. There are also several efforts by various organizations to quickly standardize the technology for pre-packaged media and other delivery mechanisms. The display side of this equation is very well accepted by studios and technologists."

Gaming in 3D

"You can bet 3D movies are here for some time to come and it's only logical for that to trickle down to video games," said Brian Leake, vice president of technology, Disney Interactive Studios. "There were a number of 3D high definition display technologies, some of which are using polarizing glasses, on the floor of GDC this year. I'm really excited that R&D is underway. It's just a matter of time before that becomes a reality in the living room. So I believe the work we're doing today helps reveal how consumers react to 3D experiences—what works and what doesn't. That tangible work is critical to innovate in the games we're releasing now, and for those experiences we'll be inventing for the future."

Oliver said that videogames will be a key driver for consumer adaptation to 3D, just as game consoles like Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 were used to introduce HD visuals and Blu-ray Disc to early adopters. He said many of the 3D TVs currently on the market aren't

"The first game to use Blitz Games Studios' BlitzTech is Sega's House of the Dead: Overkill for the Wii."

demonstrated in stores because there is no 3D TV content that can be easily shown. Oliver believes using an Xbox 360 or PS3 running a 3D game on a 3D TV will convince people that the 3D TV is the next big purchase for the home.

"Gamers are often first to adopt new technology, and being first probably means they have an older non-1080 plasma HD TV and would probably consider upgrading soon," said Oliver. "This feature gives them a reason to do just that. Granted, the global meltdown will slow this adoption rate, but in these times people spend less going out and start to justify purchases for the home. I don't believe there has been significant slowdown in the sale of videogames."

The first game to use Blitz Games Studios' BlitzTech is Sega's House of the Dead: Overkill for the Wii. Other developers are currently utilizing the technology, which was demonstrated at GDC in March. The proprietary tech runs on Xbox 360 and PS3 and must be encoded on the disc. It requires the game to draw the views from two different camera angles, which is the same way 3D movies are drawn. Oliver says BlitzTech has the ability to go further to get a game more tuned for an excellent 3D experience.

"People doubted if the modern consoles were powerful enough and capable of producing Stereo 3D for these new monitors and 3D-ready TVs that have been out for a couple of years now," explains Oliver. "We decided not to discount it, as others have, and looked into it further. It has been difficult to get the 3D working but we want to show that it's possible. I also want 3D TV and monitor companies to appreciate that consoles can do 3D and that this market needs to be considered."

> "According to Ubisoft, Avatar will encompass the most extensive use of 3D technology in videogames to date."

Disney Imagineers have been working with 4D at the Disney theme parks for years, blending 3D technology with real effects like air and water to create memorable rides that stand out from anything in movie theaters or at home. One of the latest attractions, Toy Story Mania!, will be used by Disney Interactive Studios to test out consumer reaction to 3D gaming. Papaya Studio is developing the fall carnival shooting game.

"For a number of our upcoming titles we've been researching techniques to enhance the 3D experience," says Leake. "One idea we've been experimenting with are Anaglyphic techniques to create stereoscopic images in real-time. These techniques require 3D glasses with colored lenses, similar to those used in movie theatres for years. Until recently, both rendering limitations with consoles and trends for long gameplay sessions haven't really made them suitable. But we think there's opportunities for experiencing stereoscopic 3D in bite-sized chunks, which fits perfectly with some of our games like Toy Story Mania! The effect is amazing, and has been inspirational to Disney Interactive Studios in terms of how we can apply similar 3D techniques to our other titles in the future."

Given the fact that both Disney and Pixar are creating all of their movies from now on in 3D, the game division should have plenty of licenses to choose from moving forward.

Ubisoft has partnered with 20th Century Fox to develop a videogame that will be released in conjunction with the upcoming film, *Avatar,* written and directed by James Cameron (his first feature film since *Titanic* in 1997). The Avatar movie tells the story of Jake, an ex-Marine who exists in an alien world as an avatar, a human mind in an alien body. Little information has been released about this game, but Ubisoft is working on a 3D version of the game that brings Cameron's vision of 3D technology into the videogame space. According to Ubisoft, Avatar will encompass the most extensive use of 3D technology in videogames to date.

In the PC space, Nvidia launched its GeForce Vision stereoscopic 3D technology in January. According to Andrew Fear, product manager for the technology at Nvidia, game developers are now working on specially enhanced effects for upcoming games to take advantage of 3D gaming. Blizzard Entertainment recently issued patch 3.0.8 that optimizes World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King for GeForce Vision.

"If you look at what we do as a normal 3D graphics company, we have a hugely powerful graphics chip that's capable of doing more than just rendering a game," said Fear. "We can do things like CUDA and PhysX and now stereoscopic which requires more processing. A game like Unreal Tournament III or Mirror's Edge, they work with our 3D as well as our PhysX. It's the perfect complement to make the gaming experience better."

"I expected to see a marginal improvement over the previous generation of this technology, but what I saw blew me away—crystal clear 3D with no hint of flickering or ghosting," said Stephen Viljoen, chief operating officer, Slightly Mad Studios, developer of the upcoming Electronic Arts title, Need for Speed: Shift. "For the first time, the technology is at a level where one can have full-on gaming sessions without any side effects, apart from sore facial muscles from all the grinning."

Niklas Westberg, technical director at Ubisoft's Massive Entertainment added that one of the most interesting things about Nvidia's 3D technology is that it makes game replayability a really enjoyable experience. He said you get to know your favorite games even better because gamers can fully immerse into those games, and enjoy a full 3D experience.

Fear says that PC gamers will start experiencing the first wave of new games designed to take full advantage of this 3D technology later this year, and that 25 to 50 PC games are expected to kick off what is likely to be a new genre of PC games this year, especially since the technology is not only backwards-compatible with over 350 games, but it also works with 60 millions GeForce cards already in the global marketplace.

While the future looks like it will replicate our 3D lifestyle, it won't happen overnight. Just as HD TVs took time, and price cuts, before becoming mainstream, so too will 3D TVs. Considering the current economic meltdown, enticing consumers to fork over more money to upgrade from that HD TV they recently bought is going to be a stiff order. But over time, as more 3D content populates the entertainment landscape, early adopters will be replaced by moms and dads who want to keep their kids happy, and quiet, with the latest 3D Disney movies on Blu-ray Disc and the newest 3D Disney movies. It's just a matter of time before 3D becomes the norm for gaming, just as online gameplay and functionality has become ingrained in every type of game today.

3D Movie Release List

Up! Disney Pixar's first 3D feature follows an old man and a stowaway as they adventure through the sky in a house equipped with hundreds of balloons.

Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaur 20th Century Fox and Blue Sky bring Mammoths and dinosaurs from extinction in 3D CGI. This time around, the gang copes with parenthood and an underground world.

G-Force Walt Disney Pictures and Jerry Bruckheimer tell the story of unique guinea pigs trained for covert government operations in this live action and CGI 3D feature.

Final Destination: Death Trip 3D Following in the successful horror footsteps of My Bloody Valentine 3D, the grim reaper goes after another group of teens with elaborate death traps.

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs This CGI film is based on the classic children's book that creates a world in which food falls from the sky.

Toy Story in 3D Pixar has gone back to its first CGI movie and refined it for 3D. Next year audiences will get a revamped Toy Story 2 in 3D, which leads up to the summer 2011 release of Toy Story 3D.

Disney's A Christmas Carol Robert Zemeckis goes from Beowulf to Charles Dickens' Christmas classic with this CGI tale, featuring Jim Carrey as Scrooge.

Avatar James Cameron created breakthrough 3D technology to tell this live-action 3D sci-fi story of a paralyzed war veteran who discovers an alien race on a distant planet.

Over a dozen more 3D movies like **Shrek 4, TR2N, Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland,** and **Alpha and Omega**

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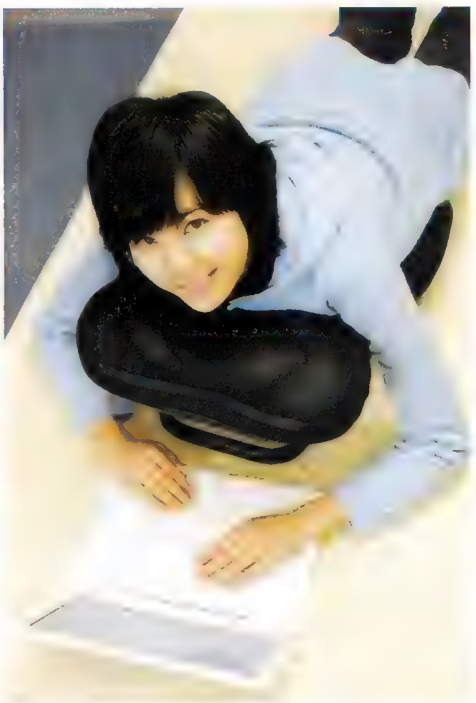
Alter Ego Comics $224.99 www.alteregocomics.com

Now you can reenact your favorite scenes from the original Star Trek series directly from the comfort of your room with the Star Trek Full Wall Mural from York Wallcoverings. Measuring in at 6' by 10', this fully detailed mural accurately depicts the bridge of Captain James T. Kirk's USS Enterprise NCC-1701 and comes printed on pre-pasted "Surestrip" material that won't damage the underlying wall. For added effect I recommend streaming up some old Christmas lights, balling up some lint from your dryer's lint trap to create some make-shift Tribbles and tossing on the Star Trek theme song. Prepare to boldly go where no man has gone before....



Super Easy Cushion, aka "Lazy Geek's Cushion"

Rare Mono Shop by Thanko Corp. $86.00 www.raremonoshop.com

At the end of a long day at the office the last thing I want to do upon returning home is plant my backside back down in another chair, no matter how ergonomic it claims to be. And regardless of whether I am reading, gaming or using my laptop I can only tolerate laying flat on the floor for so long before my elbows and back become sore. Enter the Lazy Geek's Cushion from Thanko. Measuring in at 800x490mm (roughly 32x19in) and weighing only 6.6 lbs, the Lazy Geek's Cushion is the perfect solution for those looking to alleviate the strain of lying on their stomach or flat on their back or those with space limitations. The device supports 198 lbs of pressure and has 5 height adjustment settings—not to mention, comes with a washer-friendly removable cover. When it comes to your physical well-being, comfort knows no price.

The Real Ghostbusters Complete Collection

TIME LIFE $179.99 www.timelife.com

Strap on your proton packs and get ready for the best thing to come from TIME LIFE since their "Epic of Flight" series (ask your parents about it).

Available for the first time on DVD, this 25-disc collection features all 147 episodes of The Real Ghostbusters and all episodes of Slimer and the Real Ghostbusters! If you aren't already seething with ectoplasm, get this; the collection features over twelve hours of bonus materials which include: The never before aired original promotional pilot for The Real Ghostbusters, 21 on-camera commentary tracks, 5 exclusive documentaries, 86 episode introductions, interviews with the cast and crew and 16-page booklets with episode synopses, trivia and art for every episode, scripts, storyboards, *breath* image galleries, music & effects audio tracks. The set comes neatly packaged in a firehouse collector's box that houses 5 separate steel DVD cases containing all 25 discs.

Razer Carcharias

www.razerzone.com $79.99

There are plenty of options out there if you're in need of a gaming headphone set, but most are just not that good if you're particularly discriminating. Razer is now entering the market with a rather impressive product called the Carcharias, standing at the top of the pack with its noted comfort and solid design. The noise filtering microphone works extremely well, and while the bass response is a bit muddy in explosive situations, the overall audio quality is quite pleasing in its price range, holding up well for music too.

Play takes a look at the world of joystick modding; the motivation behind it, the difficulty level, and if it is something for everyone.

words Nick Des Barres & Eric L. Patterson

A Stick of Your Own

Eric L. Patterson: I'll kick this off with a simple question; why in the world would anybody want to do a joystick mod?

Nick Des Barres: There were two reasons for me. One was to possess a truly "arcade-perfect" stick, containing the exact same Sanwa Denshi parts as a Japanese Street Fighter IV cabinet. The second was for pure bragging rights; I imagine it comes from the same center of the brain that motivates people to paint badass flames on their hotrods or decorate their skateboards.

ELP: We both seemed to be very passionate about our personal journeys in joystick-modding, and what I found interesting in thinking about it all was the design aspect. Both of us are big into graphic design, and both of us put a lot of effort into making artwork for our sticks that was both unique and reflective of who we are. One might argue that the main purpose of a joystick mod is to get a better functioning stick, yet for me at times I was far more concerned with how it would end up looking.

NDB: Oh, no question. I already own arcade-accurate Hori Real Arcade Pro sticks, but I wanted an arcade-accurate stick that was mine, and mine alone. I've long admired the gonzo custom sticks people post on shoryuken.com's Tech Talk forum, and with the release of SFIV and MadCatz's easily-moddable Tournament Edition sticks, it felt like the time was right to attempt my own.

ELP: That's exactly what got me to give this a go: the MadCatz sticks and their promise of offering the ability of customization even to people who have never done stick modding before. I'm not the type to go out and buy a bunch of components to MacGyver together a joystick.

NDB: Same here. I admire custom sticks, but I knew I didn't have the tech skill (or patience!) to build one from scratch. Like you, my background is in graphic design, and I was attracted by Photoshop templates made available for the MadCatz sticks. Pre-release hype made it sound like you'd be able to swap in new art at will ... but it wasn't quite that simple.

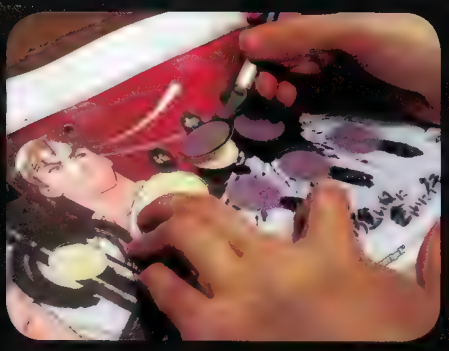
> "I'm not the type to go out and buy a bunch of components to MacGyver together a joystick." ELP

ELP: See, it's funny; I was originally envious of you having the Tournament Edition stick, because I thought swapping art would be a piece of cake. But, that ended up not being the case.

For me with the SE SFVI stick, I had to find some way to stick new artwork directly onto the base, and hope it would hold up under use. The solution I found was a "Lamilabel" from Kinko's, which is a type of pouch lamination with one side having a sticky back to it. You print out your artwork, put it inside the Lamilabel, and then when heated up, the two sides seal around your artwork. So far, so good, and I think it's a possible solution to anybody who has a joystick where they want to give it some custom artwork but aren't quite sure how to go about it.

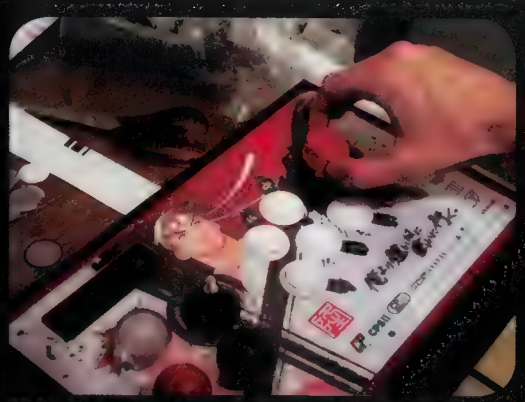
What I will say, as an addendum to that, is I had my best luck when I didn't stick exactly to the artwork templates. Never count on anything being exact; give your art extra room so that when you trim it, you won't have gaps or borders showing. As well, if at all possible, trim it when on the actual stick, not before, to better insure a more natural look and fit.

NDB: Definitely. The templates available on the net aren't perfect; you should always allow some "bleed" area. With the TE stick, I considered two



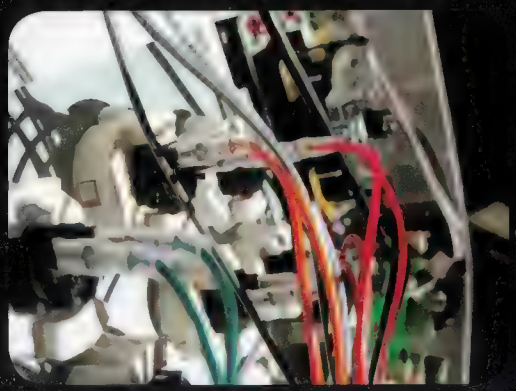
TIP: Wait to trim holes and edges until you have the art matched up to either the acrylic faceplate or the joystick body itself.

"Eternal Challenger"
stick design by Nick Des Barres



TIP: Firmly but gently push your new buttons straight into the base to avoid damage to the tabs that hold them in place.

TIP: Always take care not only to remember which wire goes to which button, but also in being careful when removing the wires so you don't damage them.



"Queen of Fighters"
stick design by Eric L. Patterson

TIP: It's an easy point to forget: joystick orientation. Before securing it in place, test your new joystick to make sure its physical orientation matches up with the proper in-game directions. (So you don't get a stick that moves you left when you push up.)

solutions to get my design on the damn thing. One was to order a polycarbonate laminate surface from mamemarquees.com and cut it to shape; the other was to do a simple printout at Kinko's and put it beneath a custom-cut clear acrylic plate. I went with the second, aided by a friendly guy on shoryuken named Jurby, who cut a plate for me at a very reasonable price. I used the original plastic art layer from the stick as a guide against which to x-acto out the printed design, and it fit perfectly. Neither solution is easy, and if I had known how difficult it would be beforehand, I may not have attempted a mod at all. Thankfully, snapping in my new buttons and stick was a lot easier.

ELP: That's the other big factor in doing a joystick mod; replacing the hardware. Unlike your TE, my SE didn't come stock arcade-spec parts, so for me, buying new internals was more than just for looks. I went with lizardlick.com, and picked up a new Sanwa joystick and Sanwa buttons colored to match the theme I was going for. The other popular choice for parts seems to be Seimitsu, another company known for producing arcade-level hardware. Relatively speaking, getting everything out and back in was pretty easy, and I've got to say, I absolutely noticed the difference. A couple extra bucks for parts upgrades can really give you a stick that feels like top quality.

NDB: I'm glad you noticed the difference! There's a reason Sanwa and Seimitsu parts are so revered—they kick ass. No home peripheral maker can compare. Walk into any arcade in Tokyo, and every single cabinet will be furnished with components from one or both companies. My TE already came with an authentic Sanwa JLF stick, so for me it was merely a matter of swapping in a new Seimitsu ball top and buttons to match my design. I also plugged the two right-most buttons on my stick, since they interfered with fifteen years of six button Street Fighter muscle memory. Another good online source for parts is akihabarashop.jp, but unfortunately, as of press time, both retailers have temporarily stopped taking new orders because of the sheer volume of component sales spurred by SFIV.

ELP: Yeah, I think the combined release of that and the easily-moddable MadCatz sticks has really lit a fire in the heart of a lot of gamers out there. I mean, look at us; that's why we're here talking about this in the first place.

"It was a bit of a splurge, but I had a sacred duty to play SFIV properly..."

While on the subject of parts, though, what about the overall cost of our projects? Price factor has always played a big part in why I've never owned an "arcade quality" stick. With the FightStick SE, and doing my mod, on top of the cost of the stick itself, the replacement joystick was around $22 and the eight buttons were $3 each. So, I probably got pretty close to the price of your TE stick, which is a price range I swore I would never spend on a stick, but that resulted in me getting the exact stick that I was wanting. For you, things didn't even start until the price range that I finished at.

NDB: It was a bit of a splurge, but I had a sacred duty to play SFIV properly... I'm sure you'll feel the same way when The King of Fighters XII is released in July! On top of $149 retail for the TE, I spent about $25 on my replacement parts, $25 for the acrylic plate, and $50 or so on assorted sumi ink, fude brushes and rice paper for my design.

ELP: Ah, indeed; joystick modding isn't just about changing the inside, but also the outside as well. That's something important to keep in mind, for anybody thinking about doing their own mod. Upgrade your stick to be what you need it to be for the games you play, but also craft something that reflects who you are as a gamer.

As much as I loved doing this project, the one point I was never able to get over was the one thing that has always kept me from being a huge joystick user; having the stick locked to one particular console. With the time, money, and effort I put in, I have this great controller that is only playable on one of my two main systems.

NDB: That's the age-old problem with expensive arcade sticks. A multi-console stick would never receive first party approval, so we have to leave it to the fan community to solve the compatibility problem. Elaborate custom I/O circuit boards exist, but unless you're handy with a soldering iron, they're not a viable option. I want to be able to use my PS3 FightStick on my 360, too, so I'm considering a layman's solution—the $99 XCM Cross Fire PS3-to-360 controller adapter. Add that to some $250 already spent, and it becomes clear that custom arcade sticks aren't cheap. I'd caution anyone thinking about modding their own to be absolutely certain in their commitment to follow the project through to its completion. In the end, I'm glad I did it.

ELP: I guess, let me ask this final question, since it's basically the reason we're doing this feature; is stick modding something for everyone? I think even with starting points like the FightSticks, it can still be a bit daunting, but with a little work and a lot of reading about what others have done, it's a rewarding experience. I now own a joystick that not only works great, but is the only one of its kind out there. It's not a joystick; it's my joystick.

NDB: It's not for everyone, but maybe that's the whole point. Do you want a joystick that belongs to you, and you alone? Not merely a quality stick for playing fighting games the way they were intended, but also a stick imbued with your identity? If you can answer yes—and if you can afford it!—I know you'll be rewarded by customizing your own. The MadCatz sticks make fine jumping off points, and shoryuken.com is a great place to find inspiration.

Want to know more? Check out the full-length version of this feature, along with more photos of both sticks, at playmagazine.com—just go there and do a search for "joystick mods."

BACK OF THE BOOK

05_09 GREG ORLANDO
SENIOR EDITOR

HOW QUICKLY THEY FORGET

"There's room here for everyone and for every type of game. It's not an either/or situation. It never was. Some of the best games ever made are casual. History doesn't lie."

It used to be that all games—all of them that truly mattered for the health and success of the newly born video game industry—were casual. People would go to a bar or a pizza joint and divest themselves of their quarters. They'd visit the local 7-Eleven to pick up notebooks or cereal or beer or whatever, and end up seeing if they were good enough to make it to the intermission scenes in Pac-Man. They shot Asteroids after doing their grocery shopping, and played football with dancing black-and-white Xs and Os after sitting down with the family at a restaurant.

The people took their games home with them. They played Pong with mom and dad, and then mom and dad would play against the neighbors. And damn it, even the goober neighbors who were too intellectually shriveled to understand why giving apples to children at Halloween would ensure their crapshack got royally egged every year could get into the act, could join in on the fun.

The game industry blossomed and grew based on the strength of these games. You can thank Pong and Space Invaders and Galaxian and Tank and Asteroids and Pac-Man for giving the game industry two legs to stand on. They had a universal appeal. They had the people lining up to play them.

Spacewar! and Computer Space, two variations on the same theme, proved to be footnotes. Spacewar! was arguably the first video game. Computer Space was the first game to be made for a commercial market. Computer Space was a genuine novelty, a beautiful woman at a Star Trek convention, if you will…Yet it failed. The game was too complex. It proved impenetrable for a mass audience. It's remembered now only in vaguely academic papers and by film buffs who suggest that if they have Computer Space in the not-too-distant future (as seen in the creepy Soylent Green), then it's time to start living in the present, baby. Big time.

Now, the game industry has grown and grown. It's survived Custer's Revenge, the Super Mario Bros. movie, the Nokia N-Gage, and Superman 64. A dim-witted Jaime Kennedy couldn't kill games with his deathly unfunny "comedy" at the 2007 Electronic Entertainment Expo, and neither could mega-buffoon Jack Thompson with his endless lawsuits.

In 2009, the game industry supports a three-way home console war as well as a thriving PC and handheld market. As the economy nosedives into the toilet, there's reason to believe the game industry will suffer, but emerge relatively unscathed. If games withstood Kennedy's "humor," it seems they can withstand anything.

Lines have been drawn in the sand, though, and this is troubling. The emergence of the Nintendo Wii and the increased popularity of cell phone gaming have birthed the "casual" market. As in, "Casual games are ruining the industry."

Somewhere along the line, games lost their universal appeal. Game makers started catering more to the Dungeons and Dragons and Clearasil set. The idea that games could be played and enjoyed by everyone was replaced by the notion that games should be played by anyone with the hot new console—and who could afford both the cartridge (or disk) and the time commitment.

Game fans feel threatened now by the influx of games meant for everyone. They sneer and snarl at the notion of Wii Sports. They shake their empty heads at the thought that seniors are playing video games in rest homes—a bad euphemism if there ever was one—or when they see Carnival Games on the shelves of a game store. They'll claim casual games are ruining it for the hardcore.

What they're really angry at is a massive influx of shitty shovelware. The Wii has sold more than 50 million units. The Nintendo DS has sold more than 100 million. Developers, always conscious of the bottom line, have sought to tap into that sweet booty juice with rushed pieces of video dreck made by developers who may, or may not, have employed anyone who could properly define "quality control." It was inevitable, this tsunami of bad software: unfortunate, of course, but inevitable.

Casual games became synonymous with shit, and anything that wasn't strictly for the diehards became casual. And the lesson of history—the great lesson—was lost.

Casual games aren't bad. There's nothing wrong with making a game that's simple to play and easy to understand. Casual games aren't bad when they're Rock Band, Guitar Hero, Pac-Man, Asteroids, Desktop Tower Defense, Super Mario Bros., or Tetris. They're bad when you have to hold your nose to play them.

There's room here for everyone and for every type of game. The 80-hour epic role-playing game can coexist beside the virtual pet simulator. Grandma can bowl with her Wii remote while the kids play Left 4 Dead when they should be studying for the SATs.

Uno on Xbox Live doesn't preclude the existence of Grand Theft Auto IV.

It's not an either/or situation. It never was.

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WAR IS BEING WAGED IN THE SHADOWS

VELVET ASSASSIN

MATURE 17+ ™

M

Blood
Strong Language
Intense Violence
Use of Drugs

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